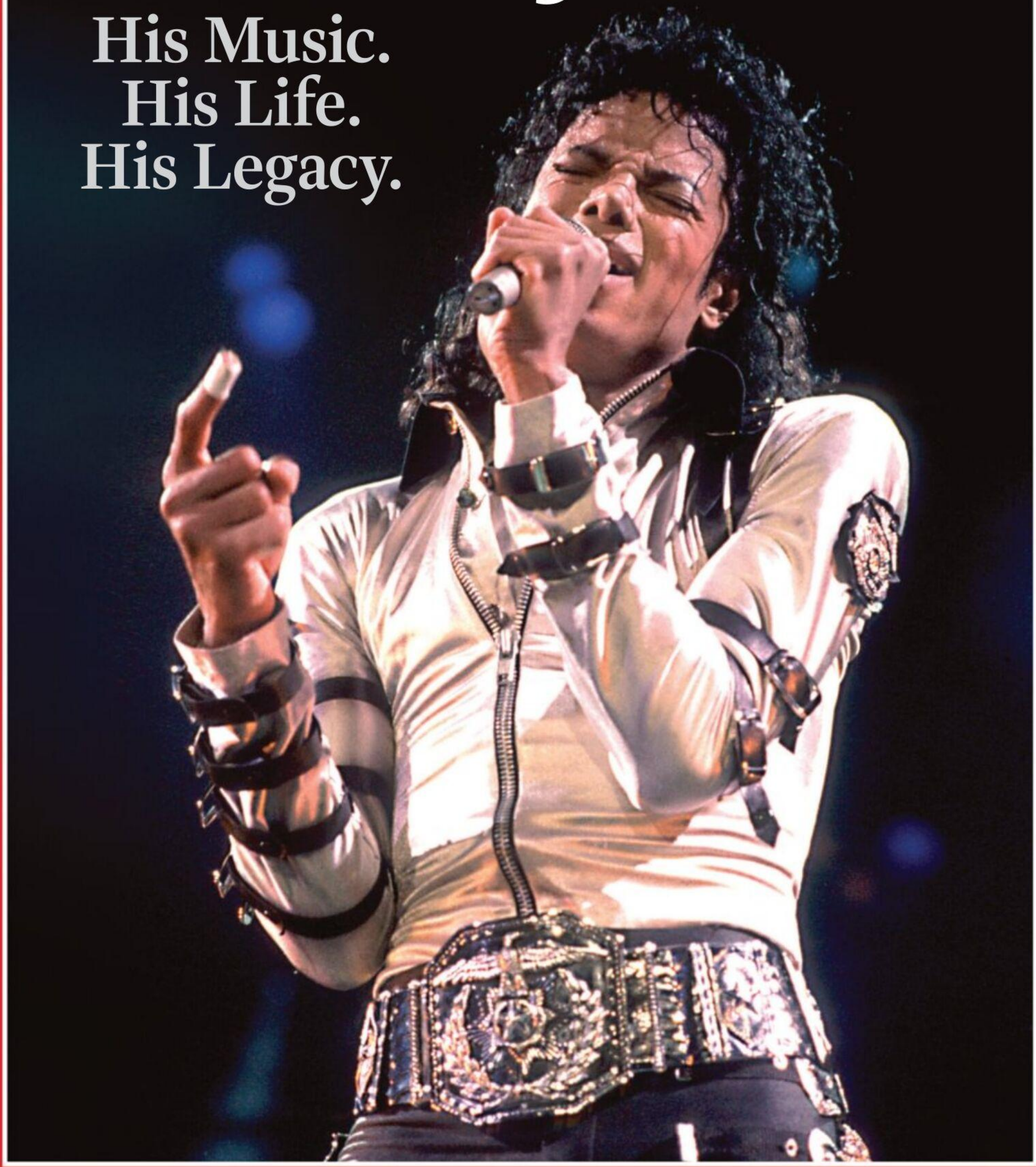
SPECIAL TIME EDITION

Michael Jackson

His Music. His Life. His Legacy.



TIME

Michael Jackson

Performing at the Jerudong Park Amphitheatre in Brunei in 1996.

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This Is It, *the 2009 documentary about Jackson's planned comeback tour, followed rehearsals at the Staples Center in Los Angeles.*

In 2001, the 30th anniversary of his career as a solo performer.

The Man in the Mirror

The Michael Jackson biopic lands in an algorithmic age that is still chasing the blueprint he built and perfected.

BY STEVEN GRAY

LAST NOVEMBER, WHEN LIONSGATE dropped the trailer for the long-awaited biopic *Michael*, the nearly minute-long video got more than 116 million views in the first 24 hours—more traffic than *Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour*, more than *Bohemian Rhapsody,* and more than the Bob Dylan biopic *A Complete Unknown*. People from Chicago to Tokyo to Johannesburg started plotting what to wear to the film's opening and the parties to celebrate it—maybe a bejeweled glove or a red leather jacket. On TikTok, fans offered "ground rules" for the occasion. But the trailer also triggered debate: Could a single film distill the story of one of the world's most complex and consequential artists? Which Michael Jackson would *Michael* resurrect—the glorious mythical icon, the wounded man, or both? Would the film, starring Jackson's nephew, sanitize the controversies that have plagued the King of Pop for more than a quarter century?

The conversations reflected something deep and global: the degree to which Michael Jackson remains an extraordinarily relevant cultural phenomenon more than 15 years after his death. There are, of course, what feels like a gazillion films,

documentaries, and interviews about the King of Pop, but not yet a definitive biopic that reflects his place in our cultural memory. The truth is, for someone whose career began more than 50 years ago, Michael Jackson has never felt more present.

Consider this: Michael reached his peak a generation before social media's AI-driven amplification could literally manufacture fame out of the mediocre. In today's crowded media ecosystem, it's hard to imagine an artist whose raw talent alone could break through at that scale.

To understand why, you have to zoom out. It's hard to describe Michael Jackson's cultural legacy in full, because it's endless and unmatched. But let's start here: He provided, indisputably, the original blueprint for the modern celebrity artist. Elvis helped give birth to American pop music. The Beatles elevated rock. But Michael industrialized the package, fusing music, dance, style, and branding. His template guides Beyoncé and Taylor Swift, and will likely inform every aspiring cross-genre juggernaut for generations.

Michael pioneered the modern artist-as-enterprise model. He sold more than 400 million records, easily making him one of history's most successful solo artists. More than four decades after its release in 1982, *Thriller* remains the best-selling album of all time and by some estimates has reached 100 million copies globally. He was a savvy investor (and also a world-class spendthrift), buying ATV Music Publishing, later merged into Sony/ATV, which controlled some of music's most valuable catalogs, including works by the Beatles, Elvis, and Little Richard.

From the Great Mausoleum in Glendale, California, Michael Jackson continues to outearn most living artists. His estate is estimated to have generated as much as $3.5 billion since 2009. On Spotify, he has surpassed 60 million monthly listeners. On many nights each week, crowds line up to see *MJ: The Musical* in New York, London, and Hamburg, with touring productions traveling through the U.S. and Australia—an Asian tour is planned for late 2026, the U.K. in 2027. Meanwhile, in Las Vegas, Cirque du Soleil's *Michael Jackson ONE* has run since 2013 and is extended through 2030, a very big deal in a city where residencies often drift in a few seasons.

All of this helps to explain why the biopic lands

Diana Ross (opposite) was an early champion of the Jackson 5. Below: The brothers performed on The Ed Sullivan Show *in 1969, solidifying their superstardom.*

In 1975, the Jackson 5 appeared on the Cher *variety show. Three years later, Michael played the Scarecrow in* The Wiz *(opposite), a reboot of* The Wizard of Oz.

with such force. The truth is, *Michael* isn't just tapping into nostalgia. It's meeting an audience that never really let him go.

AN AMERICAN ORIGIN STORY

An assessment of Michael Jackson's life starts with a familiar American story—one rooted in the Great Migration, when many Black families carried their hopes northward in search of dignity and steadier work. Michael's father, Joseph, born in Arkansas, met Katherine Scruse, an Alabama native, in East Chicago, Indiana, in 1947. They married two years later and settled in nearby Gary, where he took a job at U.S. Steel. Eventually, he set aside his own musical ambitions to manage his sons' ascent. At first, the Jackson 5 performed in community shows in northern Indiana, and then on amateur show circuits from Chicago to Harlem. Joe drilled into his sons a disciplined, nearly militaristic pursuit of perfectionism, because the stakes were high: Black kids had to be twice as good to succeed.

So the Jackson 5 embodied that aspiration: polished, electrifying, tight, and still soulful. They personified Motown's "Sound of Young America" strategy, which used pop-soul as a subversive racial integration tool. Black families across America felt a collective pride. My mom still talks about the night she trailed her older sister into a Jackson 5 concert in New Orleans, swept up in the miracle of seeing young men who gloriously looked like them commanding a stage in a country that insisted it wasn't theirs.

The Jackson 5 personified Motown's "Sound of Young America" strategy, which used pop-soul as a subversive racial integration tool.

By the early 1970s, as a young teen, Michael had become the group's undeniable star. It was his rare combination of innocence and command of pitch, dynamics, and tone that convinced Motown's founder, Berry Gordy, to launch him into solo recordings with "Got to Be There." But it was *Off the Wall,* produced by Quincy Jones in 1979, that unlocked Michael's genius. The album delivered some of his most powerful, captivating songs, and on the tour and videos that followed, Jackson was the ultimate showman.

Steeped in Motown's soulful elegance, sharpened by Jones' precision, and driven by instinct, Jackson fused funk, R&B, rock, gospel, and dance into some-

thing unmistakably American and Black—and yet borderless. *Thriller* didn't just shatter MTV's racial gatekeeping; it made clear that Jackson had created a new cultural space. He was a child of America who carried the beauty and burdens of his lineage into an art form the world could embrace. His shared language made strangers feel, for a moment, like one united nation under a groove.

When Michael reached his peak in the 1980s, he seemed to stand above the culture that made him. *Thriller* was the inflection point: Its music videos turned the relatively young medium into art, and its rollout transformed album releases into profit-making events. His tours reimagined the economics and scale of live stadium performance. Even among his closest contemporaries (Prince, Whitney Houston, and Madonna), his radiance felt singular.

For those of us who grew up in that era, Michael's impact wasn't theoretical. Kids—including me—literally begged for a sequined black or white glove, or a red or black jacket covered in shiny silver buttons, in hopes of radiating the King of Pop's magic. I remember my 7th birthday party, which was in my grandmother's backyard—cake, balloons, and napkins all emblazoned with Michael's face. In hindsight, it all reflected the decade's ridiculous flamboyance.

In those years, Michael became a cultural envoy, greeted as a liberator in Eastern Europe as the Cold War ended. He seemed suspended above the gravity of America's racial politics.

But the altitude at which Michael's genius lived came at a cost. In interviews, and in his 1988 memoir, *Moonwalk,* the performer spoke of a loneliness that fame couldn't soothe. He was a man who electrified billions yet struggled to trust the few closest to him. He clearly felt most alive on the stage, but beyond its glow he remained a quiet, interior soul. People addicted to spectacle latched onto his every move, every gesture, every tabloid headline. That's part of the strange burden of superstardom: The brighter the light, the narrower the space in which one is allowed to be human.

And the evidence of Michael's otherness seemed to mount. There was the staged hyperbaric-chamber photograph that was interpreted as a bid for a Peter Pan–like immortality. Then there was the story that he sought to buy the remains of the Elephant Man, the 19th-century Londoner who suffered from a disfiguring genetic disorder, had to

support himself in a "freak show" act, was treated cruelly, and nevertheless met the world with kindness. Michael's physical transformation—the product of vitiligo, makeup to conceal its blotches, and cosmetic surgery—became a canvas onto which the world projected its fears, fantasies, and prejudices. The stories, often absurd, created a funhouse-mirror version of Michael Jackson, a distorted silhouette so vivid it began to overshadow the man himself.

"Thriller," released in 1983, was the first music video inducted into the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress.

THE ACCUSATIONS

"International furor stirred by allegations on Jackson," read an August 1993 *Los Angeles Times* headline. A psychiatrist hired by the parents of 13-year-old Jordan Chandler had told police the boy had been molested by Michael Jackson. Police raided Jackson's Southern California homes, including the Neverland ranch north of Los Angeles, while he was on the Asian leg of his Dangerous World Tour.

As the investigation deepened, the news coverage became more grotesque, sending Michael into a medical tailspin. In November, he abruptly canceled the rest of the Dangerous Tour, citing exhaustion and addiction to painkillers, and went to Europe to recover. In January, he came back to the U.S. and settled with the Chandlers for a reported $23 million without admitting wrongdoing.

In May 1994, he suddenly married Lisa Marie Presley in the Dominican Republic. That September, the newlyweds appeared on stage together at

Michael had many close friends, including Brooke Shields (a fellow child star), Elizabeth Taylor, Madonna, and Lisa Marie Presley, whom he married in 1994.

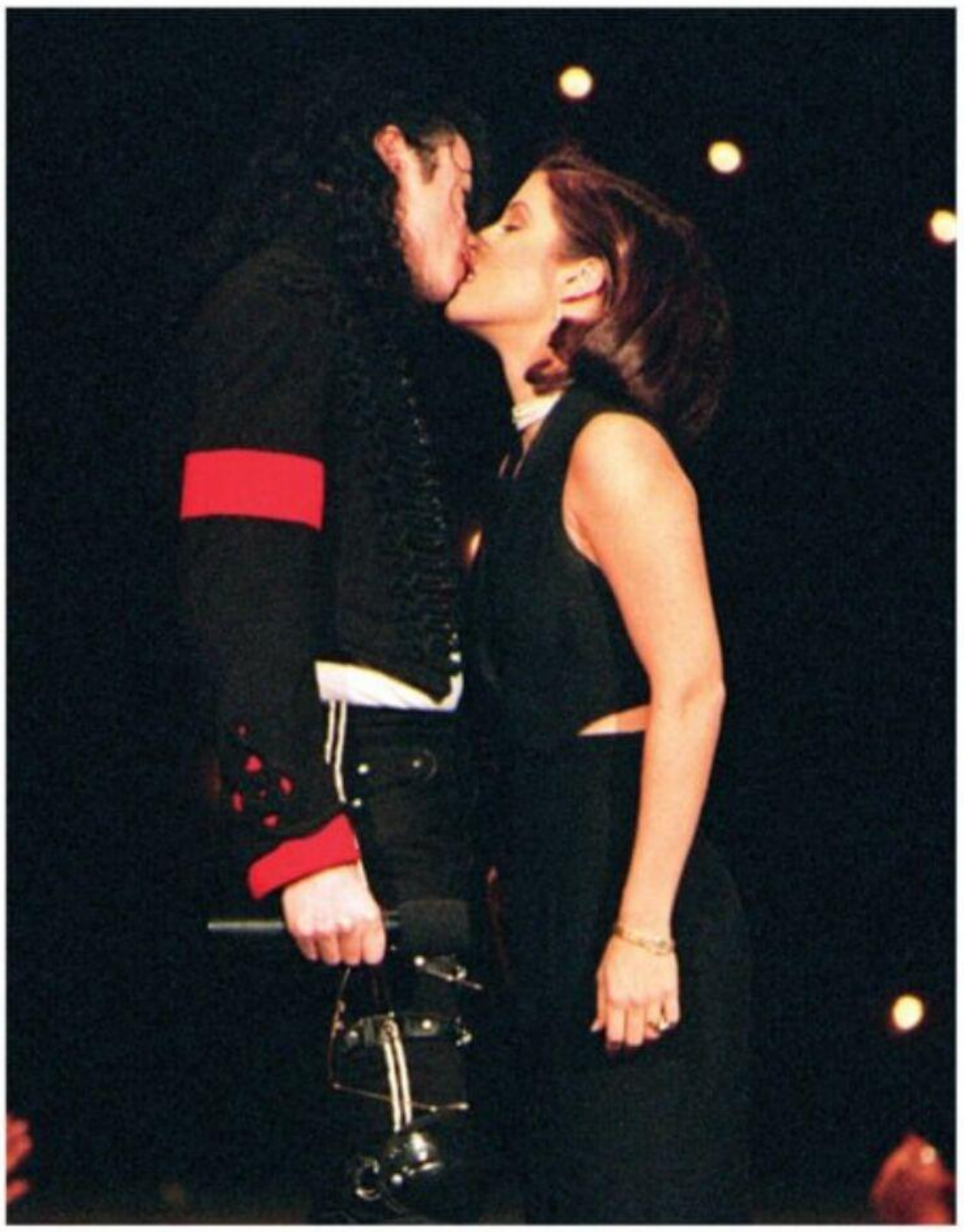
the MTV Video Music Awards and, in the cringiest of moments, kissed. It registered less as romance than tableau. America, after all, loves the illusion of redemption—until we don't. Lisa Marie's own mother, Priscilla Presley, observed in her 2025 memoir: "He married her at a time when he desperately needed good publicity that depicted him as a desirable heterosexual man. It was one thing to legally fight the child molestation charges against him. There was no way to come out of that looking good. But photos of him with Elvis's daughter wearing that huge diamond engagement ring he'd had made for her? That image was pure gold." By the end of 1996, the King of Pop and the Princess of Rock and Roll were divorced.

Michael's transformation continued with the birth of his children, Prince Michael in 1997, Paris in 1998, and Bigi (formerly Blanket) in 2002. Fatherhood helped humanize the singer—even if some of Jackson's parenting methods were considered unconventional (for example, requring his young children to wear face masks in public).

In the early 2000s, there were more allegations about inappropriate contact with children. In one case, criminal charges were filed, leading to a trial in which Jackson was acquitted. And in 2026, two months before *Michael* was scheduled to debut in theaters, four adult siblings filed a lawsuit against the Jackson estate, alleging that they had been abused by the entertainer for more than a decade. In a statement, an attorney for the estate criticized the suit as a "money grab" and added that the siblings had defended Jackson for "more than 25 years."

THE TRAGEDY

The news of Michael Jackson's death broke on an ordinary afternoon, June 25, 2009. It arrived like a blow—sudden and hard to believe, like an online hoax. TMZ posted the story around 2:45 p.m., less than 20 minutes after Jackson was



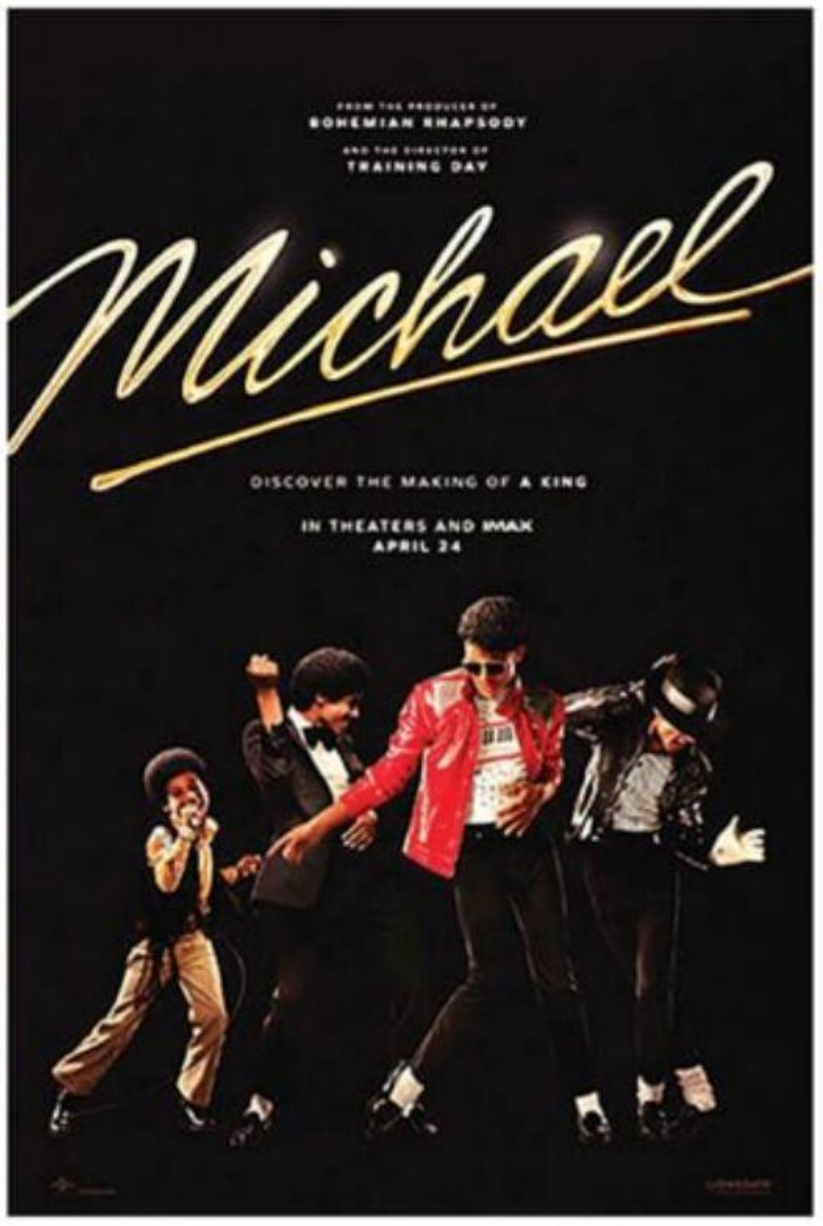
pronounced dead and before major traditional news outlets confirmed it. The internet convulsed—numerous edits to Jackson's Wikipedia page overwhelmed the site—as millions of us reached for something to explain our loss. America, and the world, had built Jackson into a mythical, immortal creature. Now, the dream collapsed.

We soon learned the complicated truth. Michael had been in deep rehearsals for a monumental return to the stage—*This Is It,* a 50-show series in London, designed to prove that he could rise above not only the scandals but also the standard we'd come to expect from him. In rehearsal video footage, Jackson's talent remained astonishingly intact, even as his body visibly told another story: restless and fragile, with signs of a man stretched thin by insomnia and his own perfectionism. Into that vulnerable space stepped Conrad Murray, a physician who forgot his oath.

"He married [Lisa Marie] at a time when he desperately needed good publicity that depicted him as a desirable heterosexual man."

—PRISCILLA PRESLEY

Jackson hired Murray as his personal doctor. Murray would later testify that for several weeks during the grueling rehearsals, he provided Jackson with propofol—a powerful anesthetic often used in medical procedures—to help him sleep. In the early-morning hours of June 25, Jackson was in a rented Los Angeles mansion. Murray gave him a series of sedatives and, ultimately, propofol. Then, in the late morning, Murray left Jackson alone. When Murray returned to the house, he found Jackson unresponsive. Paramedics and detectives arrived and found an oxygen tank, prescription bottles, disposable needles, orange juice, and latex gloves. Jackson was taken to a hospital and pronounced dead. Autopsy and police reports noted that Jackson, then 50 years old and



Opposite: The King of Pop's Super Bowl XXVII performance turned the halftime show into must-watch TV. Above: Benet Monteiro as Michael in MJ: The Musical*; a poster for the biopic* Michael.

5 feet 9 inches tall, weighed just 136 pounds. He wore a wig. His lips had been tattooed pink.

Three weeks later, about 31 million people watched Jackson's memorial service on U.S. television—slightly fewer than the number who had watched Barack Obama's inauguration six months earlier. It's estimated that a billion people tuned in to the service globally, online and on television. We mourned the performer, but we also had to reconcile the enormity of his life and the starkness of its ending.

Murray was convicted of involuntary manslaughter. Jackson's family searched for legal accountability. And as the details of his case emerged, the overprescriptions pointed the story toward what was, at least in the realm of music celebrity, familiar territory.

Regardless of wealth, fame, or influence, each individual, in the end, is mortal. Michael's passing was a reminder of the pressure we place on our brightest talents, and that even the most extraordinary lives are fragile. In that recognition, we find the shape of the tragedy: a man elevated beyond measure, and a society that failed to keep him safe. His death was negligence, but it was also a failure to see the human beneath the icon.

Michael Jackson's persistent dominance reveals something about us. We're drawn to complexity until it gets too uncomfortable and asks us to sit with it. We reward simplicity, clear heroes and villains, clean story endings. Jackson's story is anything but tidy. In parts of the world, contradiction is survivable; an artist can be luminous and flawed in the same breath. In America, we tend to expect a verdict. We live in an algorithmic age that delivers culture and outrage in silos calibrated for superspecific tribes. Jackson, even in death, refuses to stay in a single box because he built something very hard to digitally manufacture: a shared pulse—the kind you hear on street corners, at wedding receptions, at bars—where any of us can, for a moment, look up from our feeds and Beat It.

That, really, is why Michael matters now. We may not all agree on which Michael we love, or which version of him we're willing to confront. But that tension—between communion and discomfort—isn't a problem for his legacy. It's the reason we can't stop celebrating his brilliance.

The 1984 Victory Tour played to 2.5 million fans at 55 shows, including this performance at Madison Square Garden.

MICHAEL JACKSON

A Thrilling Talent

Michael Jackson began his career as a pop phenom with his standout performances in the Jackson 5. Later, hits like “Thriller” and “Billie Jean” elevated him to international superstardom.

The Rise of a Singing Wonder

The Jackson 5 did not include Michael at first. But at age 3, the toddler started singing, and his talent announced itself. Michael was not only brought into the band—he took charge of it, defined it, then left it behind.

BY DAVID VON DREHLE

THE STORY STARTS WITH TALENT. NOT the sort of talent that wins the lead in the school musical, or even the sort that wins *American Idol*. This is vanishing-point talent, so far to the right of the bell curve that it needs its own sheet of graph paper. It's lonely way out there—but that part of the story comes later.

So here's Don Cornelius, creator of *Soul Train,* taking us back to the beginning. It's the mid-1960s. Cornelius is a Chicago disc jockey and announcer at WVON, a powerhouse of the Black music scene. And he finds himself at a show where five brothers from a Gary, Indiana, family are coming on stage to perform some predictable covers of songs from established groups like the Temptations. Family acts have a checkered history talentwise, so Cornelius is ready to be underwhelmed.

Jackson circa 1970, the year "I Want You Back" hit the top of the charts. It was the first of four No. 1 singles the Jackson 5 would record.

And then this kid, maybe a second-grader, spins his way out of the pack of older boys and opens his mouth to sing. And the sheer weight of Michael Jackson's talent lands as unexpectedly as a cartoon safe dropping from a desert sky. "He's only four feet tall," Cornelius recalls, "and you're looking at a small person who can do anything he wanted to do on stage—with his feet or his voice. To get to the level of people who can do that, you're talking about James Brown as a performer. You're talking about Aretha Franklin as a singer. Michael was like that as a kid. He did it all, within the framework of one package. Nobody else did that."

Michael Jackson wasn't one of those child stars who was driven to success by an overbearing parent, though his father, Joseph Jackson, was indeed overbearing to the point of violence. He wasn't a child star who briefly captured the passing fancy of *Tiger Beat* readers with a mixture of tenor and bangs. Even his fluffiest boyhood smash, "ABC," was far more sophisticated than the abundant bubblegum sugaring the Top 40 airwaves circa 1970. He wasn't boosted to stardom by the Jackson 5; the group just tried to hang on to his rocket. Jackson was a force of nature, an inevitability. All the rest is biography, what-ifs, and consequences.

He was born on August 29, 1958. His mother, Katherine, was a dedicated Jehovah's Witness with a sweet singing voice who endeavored to protect her large family from the widespread sin of the surrounding city. His father was a crane operator and a decent guitar player. Together, the parents fixed on the idea of a family singing group, which might keep the boys off the streets and—just maybe—give the family a ticket out of their dead end. As first conceived, the group didn't even include Michael. He was too young. But when he was about 3 years old, he started singing the stuff he heard his brothers rehearsing. Talent announced itself. From then on, he was the acknowledged star.

The Jackson family in an iconic 1971 image at Hayvenhurst, their Encino, California, home. Opposite: Michael on the cusp of teen idoldom.

Tito, Marlon, Jackie, Michael, and Jermaine on a Diana Ross ABC special in 1971.

Joe Jackson drove his sons relentlessly. He ridiculed their shortcomings and punished them for their mistakes. He supervised daily practice sessions with a whip in his hand; he beat the kids with fists, hangers, a razor strop. None of it was necessary to motivate Michael; the boy was a sponge when it came to developing his craft. He studied the singing of Jackie Wilson, Diana Ross, Sam Cooke, Stevie Wonder. At an age when most kids are learning the basics of do-re-mi, he was self-administering an advanced course in the Godfather of Soul. "I think James Brown is a genius, you know. When he was with the Famous Flames—unbelievable," Michael once told Oprah Winfrey. "I used to watch him on the television, and I used to get angry at the cameraman because whenever he would really start to dance, they would be on a close-up, so I couldn't see his feet. I'd shout, 'Show him! Show him!' so I could watch and learn."

Joe booked his boys into Gary's dives and strip joints, where they earned token fees plus whatever the audience tossed onto the stage. Six-year-old Michael crawled along the floor scooping coins into his pockets until his pants sagged. The next step was the so-called chitlin' circuit of Black nightclubs, and from there, the Jackson brothers made it to Harlem's Apollo Theater, where the group won an amateur-night competition in 1967. That same year, the Jacksons opened for Gladys Knight and the Pips, who were part of Berry Gordy's astonishing catalog of artists at Motown Records. Knight was so struck by the adorable prodigy that she urged the Motown boss to take a look.

Joe and Katherine sensed that time was running short. Like countless stage parents before them, they understood the moment to launch a child star is well before the hormones hit. As a family friend once said, "Katherine knew the only way out of Gary was through Michael. . . . One day she turned to me and said, 'Michael is cute now, but he won't stay that way forever. Then what do we do? They've got to get a record contract now.'"

This urgency wasn't lost on Michael, who had a grown man's sense of commerce behind his big brown eyes and cherub cheeks. Impatient, Joe took his boys to record a single at tiny Steeltown Records in Gary. Ben Brown, the label's president, recalled that the youngster was unhappy at the subsequent photo session. "Michael said the setup looked like a family portrait," Brown once told an interviewer.

"He said, 'Isn't this supposed to be business?' So he set up the group the way he thought it should be and took his pose at the front, and that's the picture we used. He had some savvy. He knew even from then."

Gordy finally agreed to see the Jacksons the following year, 1968. The Motown mogul listened with a poker face to an entire set. Inside, Gordy later said, he was thinking that Michael's superhuman dancing was too mature for his piping voice, and he would need a brand of music written just for him. "We could not believe this old man in this young kid's body," Gordy said. When the music stopped, he handed Joe a contract. The brothers bounced with joy, then stepped onto Motown's conveyor belt to stardom. And what was that like? Wall-to-wall work. The house songwriters started cranking out "soul-bubblegum," as Gordy called it. The arrangers and producers and sidemen pushed the boys in search of a Jackson 5 sound. There were endless hours with the Motown fashion crew, trying on wild clothes, and more hours with the hairstylists, and still more hours with Gordy's etiquette teachers. Inside the studio, there was a name for the group handling the Jacksons: "the Corporation."

"We could not believe this old man in this young kid's body."

—BERRY GORDY, FOUNDER OF MOTOWN RECORDS

After a year in the Corporation's factory, the Jackson 5 were a finished product released to the public with a single called "I Want You Back." The brothers traded snippets over a percolating bass and percussion line, but it was Michael's song; he owned it from the moment he soared thrillingly on a glissando to plead "Ooooh, ba-by, give me one more chance." And with that, he was forever stamped on the world's soundtrack. The song hit No. 1 in January 1970. The next recording, "ABC," reached No. 1 in April—bumping "Let It Be," by a group called the Beatles. "The Love You

Jackson in 1973, the year Music & Me *came out. Opposite: Tito, Marlon, Michael, Jackie, and Jermaine, circa 1971.*

Save" topped the charts in June, followed by "I'll Be There" in October. Of all the great Motown acts, the Jackson 5 were the first to chart four No. 1 hits in a single year. Sometimes lost in the dazzle of their debut is the fact that with "I'll Be There," Michael Jackson gave birth to a classic ballad at the age of 12. Not even Judy Garland managed that.

The price of success, as it was for Garland and other prodigies, was a lost childhood. "There was a park across the street from the Motown studio, and I can remember looking at those kids playing games," Michael wrote in his memoir, *Moonwalk*. "I'd just stare at them in wonder—I couldn't imagine such freedom, such a carefree life—and I wish[ed] more than anything I had that kind of freedom, that I could walk away and be just like them."

He told Winfrey that he was a "lonely, sad" child, "having to face popularity and all that. There were times when I had great times with my brothers, pillow fights and things, but I . . . used to always cry from loneliness."

Oprah: "Beginning at what age?"

Michael: "Oh, very little, 8, 9."

And even as the Jackson 5 were blazing to glory, anyone with eyes to see could predict that the group wouldn't last long. There was such an imbalance of talent—four mortals and this freakishly powerful fifth. Typical of Motown acts, the Jacksons were pressed into an ensemble, from their choreography to their lyrical trade-offs to their matched outfits. But whenever young Michael eased out of the spotlight and into formation alongside his brothers, the whole act sagged. It was like hitching a Derby winner to a farm wagon, and you could see him trying to hold himself back until, after a few bars, sanity prevailed, and he would burst again to the front where he belonged.

Because he was so young, and because he made performing look so easy, and perhaps because he was a young Black man in a country whose president (as we learned when the Nixon tapes were released) believed abortion was necessary to prevent Blacks and whites from having children together, a lot of people figured Michael Jackson just happened, a force as inexplicable as music itself. Gordy, a most calculating man, recognized, however, that there was nothing accidental about him. "Michael's always been different," Gordy once said. "He's more intense than anybody. He's made a science out of this."

Michael and his brothers played basketball in the driveway at home in 1972.

And so, even as the Jackson 5 spun off a Saturday morning cartoon and cranked out more hits, the group's star steered himself into a solo career. His first No. 1 hit, tellingly, was a slightly creepy yet nakedly beautiful love song about a lonely boy and his best friend, a rat named Ben. This from a child who was already filling his family's Encino, California, estate with pets—a boa constrictor, peacocks, parrots.

After shooting for The Wiz *wrapped in 1977, Jackson, who played the Scarecrow, sat for an interview.*

There was one challenge that neither talent nor calculation could overcome. When puberty hit, Michael's voice dropped, he gained weight, and his face broke out. "I had pimples so badly, it used to make me so shy. I used not to look at myself. I'd hide my face in the dark, I wouldn't want to look in the mirror, and my father teased me, and I just hated it, and I cried every day," he told Winfrey. He imagined he was fat and ugly. He adopted a vegetarian diet that his older brother Jermaine touted as an acne cure. It was a short step from there to his first visit to a plastic surgeon. Adolescence—the loss of that cute kid he had been, the unmoored search for a suitable way to be an adult—"messed up my whole personality," he acknowledged.

But while Michael wrestled with an emotional transition common to child stars, he retained his artistic confidence. In 1974, as disco threatened to bury sweet-voiced boys in the music business, the Jacksons appeared on *Soul Train* to introduce their new single, called "Dancing Machine." It was an altogether funkier Michael Jackson doing the singing. Midsong, his face went blank as he popped through a jaw-dropping dance move called the robot. It was his own invention, the product of long hours of cunning physical engineering, nothing borrowed from James Brown. The song was a smash; the robot, a sensation. And Michael Jackson was done being a prodigy and on to something bigger.

Musician Lenny Kravitz was a child when he saw the Jackson 5 at Madison Square Garden. "It was the first concert I'd ever seen, and they were wearing these knicker pants with boots that came up to the knees. So I would put galoshes on and dance around the living room and pretend that I was Michael Jackson," he recalls.

"If he had just done what he did as a child, he would still be the genius that he is considered today," Kravitz continues. "Because it is not natural for a child to sing that way, to sing with that amount of depth, with that amount of emotion, with that amount of interpretation, the pitch, the purity, and the feeling. The only kind of musician I can compare that to is Mozart."

But while we call these "gifts," there is a point at which the gift is just too large, talents impose themselves as burdens and barriers, and distinction shades irretrievably into alienation. Which feels to a sobbing boy like an eternity of loneliness. ●

With reporting by Alex Altman, Kristi Oloffson, and Julie Rawe

Ted Ross starred as the Cowardly Lion, Jackson as the Scarecrow, Diana Ross as Dorothy Gale, and Nipsey Russell as the Tin Man in The Wiz, *directed by Sidney Lumet.*

ORIGINAL REVIEW

The Wiz

The movie, Jackson's screen debut, is now a cult classic, celebrated for both its music and for making a familiar story culturally relevant for Black audiences. But when *The Wiz* was released in 1978, it was panned by critics—including TIME's.

BY JOHN SKOW

SO MUCH WIT AND TALENT AND energy crowd this lavish variant of the Oz story that it is depressing. A cousin, not a remake, of *The Wizard of Oz, The Wiz* came to life as a Broadway musical and is based on the premise that Dorothy is a Black girl from Harlem, uptown, and that Oz is downtown, somewhere in scary and wonderful lower Manhattan.

The trouble is not that memories are stirred of the 1939 *Oz,* a film indelibly fixed in the mind. Nor is *The Wiz*'s mortal liability just that fantasy is light and money is heavy. Or that in the most expensive film musical ever made (over $30 million), there are sure to be places where we see not a fairy tale but a wounded budget projection.

What is wrong is the bankable-star problem. This means that banks will not back a big film unless the star is someone a banker has heard of. Thus, when you want to cast a Black version of *The Wizard of Oz,* you do not hold an audition for beautiful teenage Black girls who can sing like crazy. You sign up Diana Ross, who is beautiful, sings like crazy, and is known to bankers. Ross is 34, so the script calls for a Dorothy who is 24 and a shy schoolteacher. This is awkward, because for the fantasy to succeed, Dorothy needs to be childlike enough to be terrified of witches and to talk trustingly with a scarecrow, a lion, and a tin man. A 24-year-old who is that innocent should not be teaching school.

Never mind, bankable is bankable, so Ross, straining to seem naive, is blown into Munchkinland, the old New York World's Fair Pavilion, where the Wicked Witch of the East has turned hundreds of juvenile spray-paint vandals into graffiti figures. The yellow brick road leads across the Brooklyn Bridge to the World Trade Center, where Richard Pryor reigns as the Wiz. But before Dorothy gets there, she meets the cowardly lion (played by Ted Ross) and a tormented scarecrow (Michael Jackson), hung up on his pole. Jackson sings a piteous lament, to the effect that "you can't win"; Nipsey Russell belts out a ballad; and Evillene, the Wicked Witch of the West (Mabel King), rumbles out a hard-rock tune. The songs penned for Ross are dull, and poor Lena Horne, as Glinda, the Good Witch of the South, is given lyrical lemons.

A huge budget corrupts hugely. By this time, the viewer has realized that he can't win, and he must get out of the theater.

Off the Charts

Off the Wall, Jackson's breakout solo album, sold fewer copies than *Thriller* but is considered by some to be the singer's best, most cohesive recording.

BY EILEEN DASPIN

IT DIDN'T TAKE A NUMBERS-crunching genius with a banker's lamp to see that 1979's *Off the Wall* was a do-or-die proposition for Michael Jackson. The entertainer, who'd been singing professionally since he was 5, was almost 21 and had made four albums as a solo artist with Motown Records. No longer a cute kid, he was a bit stuck, looking for his breakout sound. Many assumed he'd passed his prime. Combined sales of his most recent releases, *Music and Me* (1973) and *Forever, Michael* (1975), had totaled around 1.3 million according to Chartmasters, which tracks physical album sales—a figure far below 1972's *Got to Be There* (1.6 million) and *Ben* (2.1 million). Even Jackson himself recognized what was on the line, writing in a mission statement discovered after his death, "I want a whole new character, a whole new look. I should be a tottally [sic] different person. People should never think of me as the kid who sang 'ABC' [or] 'I Want You Back.'"

Off the Wall hit that mark with a force that would set that banker's quill aquiver. The entertainer's fifth solo album and first produced with Quincy Jones was a slick, sophisticated R&B-pop showcase that established Jackson as a grown-up solo superstar. It sold close to 20 million copies. It spawned four top-10 hit singles—"Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough," "Rock with You," "Off the Wall," and "She's Out of My Life"—included a Paul McCartney cover ("Girlfriend"), and won Jackson a Grammy. In short, *Off the Wall*, with a title meant to evoke living life to the fullest, set the stage for Jackson's coronation as the King of Pop.

In surveys of Jackson's career today, *Off the Wall* sometimes takes a back seat to *Thriller,* released three years later. *Off the Wall* did not sell as well and was less of a cultural phenomenon than *Thriller,* the best-selling album of all time. *Off the Wall* has not been credited with achievements like breaking racial barriers and redefining music videos. Yet "song for song, [*Off the Wall* is] arguably the stronger album," wrote *Billboard* in 2014 on the 35th anniversary of the release. As the publication also noted, the album introduced "the Michael many fans would prefer to remember most."

Kismet as much as resolve was key to *Off the Wall,* the seeds of which were planted on the set of *The Wiz*, the 1978 reboot of *The Wizard of Oz*. During filming, Jackson, who played the Scarecrow, was reintroduced to Quincy Jones, the film's music supervisor. He was impressed with Jones (who

Off the Wall *controversially won only one Grammy, but Billboard bestowed it five awards, including #1 pop singles artist and #1 pop album. Opposite: The album cover, and Jackson with Jones.*

had worked with Frank Sinatra, Ray Charles, and Ella Fitzgerald) and asked him to collaborate on his next album. *Wiz* downtime was important to the sound of *Off the Wall,* and so were the times when Jackson headed for Studio 54 to rub elbows with celebrities such as Liza Minnelli, Steven Tyler, and Jane Fonda. He would observe the Studio 54 scene and note which songs elicited the strongest reactions from the dance floor.

The pairing of Jones, with his deep roots in R&B and jazz, with Jackson the music prodigy would ultimately reshape pop music. Jones' rolodex was stuffed with the music industry's top talents, and he used it to recruit session musicians, engineers, and songwriters across genres. He got Heatwave's Rod Temperton to write "Rock with You" and "Burn This Disco Out." Jazz-pop writer Tom Bahler contributed "She's Out of My Life," which was originally written for Sinatra (who never recorded it). Jackson himself wrote "Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough," the song that established the album's silky groove. He also covered upbeat lyricists Carole Bayer Sager and David Foster's "It's the Falling in Love."

The result bridged disco and pop/R&B and represented "discofied post-Motown glamour at its classiest," raved *Rolling Stone,* which described the album as a triumph. It was also Jackson's first step in fulfilling his manifesto, where he vowed to be "a new, incredible actor/singer/dancer that will shock the world…I will be magic. I will be a perfectionist, a researcher, a trainer, a masterer [sic]. I will be better than every great actor roped into one," he declared. "I will study…the whole world of entertainment and take it steps further from where the greats left off."

The iconic black sequined jacket that Jackson wore during the 1983 Motown 25: Yesterday, Today, Forever *TV special was his mother's.*

Setting the Beat for the Decade

In 1984, when *Thriller* was selling a million copies a week and rejuvenating the record business, TIME considered the phenomenon of its 25-year-old auteur, Michael Jackson.

BY JAY COCKS

SNAP QUESTION, NO TIME TO THINK: Which one is Michael Jackson?

The svelte young man with black curls and two-lane grin who steps out of a Mercedes into the glare of L.A.'s Melrose Avenue, wearing a bright red leather jacket with chain-mail yoke and 27 zippers as, trailed by mother and manager, he goes shopping for clothes?

Or the young man in the tie and sweater, holding a copy of the *Watchtower,* who stood at the door of an apartment in suburban Thousand Oaks, 40 miles and several dozen lifestyles northwest of Melrose, fixing the uninterested girl who answered the door with his deep eyes, saying, "Today I'm here to talk about God's word"?

The girl shut the door on Michael Jackson. The Melrose Avenue counterfeit is Eric Evans, 17, who is fleshing out a fantasy and slapping down $550 for a red leather jacket that duplicates the one Jackson wore in the video for "Thriller." The jacket that Eric is already wearing is exactly like Jackson's in "Beat It." It is a fairly innocent dream, really. Eric only wants to look like the biggest star in the world.

Star of records, radio, rock video. A one-man rescue team for the music business. A songwriter who set the beat for a decade. A dancer with the fanciest feet on the street. A singer who cuts across all boundaries of taste and style, and color too. Michael Jackson, 25 years old.

The numbers, which are incredible, are also becoming indelible. How many Beatles were there? How many homers did Babe Ruth hit? How many Grammy Awards did Michael Jackson win on February 28? How many copies of *Thriller* have been sold? Well, the Grammys are easy—Jackson won an unprecedented eight. The album question is tricky, simply because the record keeps selling, long past the point anyone expected it to. Epic Records sells more than a million copies a week worldwide; to date, *Thriller* has sold more than 30 million copies. The figures pyramid into a crazy crystal that throws off light from any angle. There are nine songs on the album. Seven have been released as singles, all have hit the Top 10, and two have reached No. 1. "I don't think the album's sales are finished," says Walter Yetnikoff, president of Epic's parent company, CBS Records Group, with just a light dusting of facetiousness. "There are some 200 million people in this country, and we've sold only 18 million copies here so far. There are a few more to go."

No sulking in competitive corporate quarters, however. Says David Lieberman, whose Lieberman

Enterprises stocks more than 2,000 record outlets: "The best thing for a record company is to have a hit. The second best thing for a record company is for somebody else to have a hit." According to Gil Friesen, president of A&M: "The whole industry has a stake in this success." The fallout from *Thriller* has given the business its best year since the heady days of 1978, when it had an estimated total domestic revenue of $4.1 billion.

Thriller has been the No. 1 album for 33 weeks. It is the best-selling album, of any kind, of all time. Keep in mind that, as Jackson's attorney John Branca points out, "Michael has the highest royalty rate in the business." That translates into approximately $2 for each of the more than 18 million albums sold in the U.S. Now you have some idea of what Jackson is using for pocket money these days. This does not, of course, count revenue from compact discs or the sale of some 350,000 copies of a $29.95 videotape called *Making Michael Jackson's Thriller.* Or continued royalties from the sale of old albums. Or the sales of *Thriller* abroad. Or the impending arrival of novelties such as the Michael Jackson doll, due to appear in stores in May at a price of $12.

Portents of a huge phenomenon are not found exclusively on sales graphs or balance sheets, however. When Jackson's hair was burned in an accident during the filming of a Pepsi commercial in late January, the mishap made headline news around the world. Once completed, two Pepsi commercials featuring Jackson and his brothers premiered on MTV. The next day, on their national morning news shows, CBS, ABC, and NBC all aired one or both spots as hot stories, not paid ads.

Jackson and his five brothers are scheduled to hit the concert trail in June in what is billed as the biggest music tour in history. Pepsi is sponsoring the tour and has already given the Jacksons $5 million. Co-promoter Don King has kicked in $3 million. The Jacksons will get 85 percent of the net receipts; King and the Jacksons' parents, Katherine and Joseph, the remaining 15 percent. King, a congenially bombastic presence whose recent show-business experience has been limited to booking prizefights, estimates that "if the boys decide to exploit every avenue of merchandising and marketing available to them—T-shirts, pay-per-view TV concerts, clothing lines, perfume lines, product identification—the tour could gross $100 million."

During the Motown 25 *special, seen by more than 47 million viewers, Jackson performed "Billie Jean" and popularized the moonwalk.*

Jackson and his brothers, both as the Jackson 5 and later simply as the Jacksons, made up one of the most appealing and popular rhythm-and-blues acts of the '70s. (There are nine brothers and sisters in the family: Maureen ["Rebbie"], 33; Jackie, 31; Tito, 29; Jermaine, 28; LaToya, 27; Marlon, 26; Michael, 25; Randy, 21; and Janet, 17.) But with the release of *Off the Wall*, Jackson's first solo album on Epic in 1979, it became clear that the group's leader was setting a pace that would be tough to follow. *Off the Wall*, which came out during the record-biz doldrums, sold 8 million copies worldwide and fielded four Top 10 hits. Those are impressive numbers by any standard, except the one that Jackson has just

set with *Thriller*. "Michael's doing this tour to help his family," says King. "I feel this will be the last tour that Michael will do with them." Lest he sound too much like the last flower child to bloom, we have attorney Branca to remind us that "Michael is very informed and aware of what is going on in his life, to an amazing degree. He's his own Rasputin."

For a record industry stuck on the border between the ruins of punk and chic synthesizer pop, *Thriller* was a thorough restoration of confidence. Its effect on listeners, especially younger ones, was nearer to a revelation. *Thriller* brought Black music back to mainstream radio, from which it had been effectively banished after restrictive "special format programming" was introduced in the mid-'70s. Listeners could put more carbonation in their pop and cut their heavy-metal diet with a dose of the fleetest soul around. "No doubt about it," says composer-arranger Quincy Jones, who produced *Off the Wall* and *Thriller* with Jackson. "He's taken us right up there where we belong. Black music had to play second fiddle for a long time, but its spirit is the whole motor of pop. Michael has connected with every soul in the world."

Thriller does not have the mean, challenging immediacy or weird fervor of a rap record like "White Lines (Don't Don't Do It)," and it lacks most of rap's snappy, snazzy street smarts. But it is consummate contemporary rhythm and blues. Jane Fonda, one of Jackson's pals, puts it as neatly and nicely as any music critic: "Michael's got a fresh, original sound. The music is energetic, and it's sensual. You can

dance to it, work out to it, make love to it, sing to it. It's hard to sit still to."

Fonda's litany tidily summarizes the range of contemporary American leisure activity, so it is no wonder that Jackson is in the air everywhere. The pulse of America and much of the rest of the world moves irregularly, beating in time to the tough strut of "Billie Jean," the asphalt aria of "Beat It," the supremely cool chills of "Thriller." *Thriller* has been on the Japanese charts for 65 consecutive weeks, and local teen idols are copying Michael's moves and even singing some of his songs. *Thriller* is also South Africa's top seller: "Jackson, you might say, bridges the apartheid gap," muses one record executive. The Soviet press has, of course, denounced Jackson, and his fans cannot buy his records in any stores. But bootleg cassettes are swapped and treasured. Says one Soviet high school senior: "His music is electrifying. His beat is the music of today."

"Michael used to say when he wrote, he'd write for everyone," says his mother, Katherine, "even though the music business would list it as rhythm and blues because of him being Black." The combined evidence of the bottom line, the hard listen, and the long view is hard to resist: Jackson is the biggest thing since the Beatles. He is the hottest phenomenon since Elvis Presley. He just may be the most popular Black singer ever.

This success is a matter of moment simply because, as Jones says, "it has never happened to a Black performer." Before anyone declares a three-day holiday on behalf of brotherhood, it ought to be pointed out that, inevitably, the qualities that make Jackson's music so accessible also divert it from expectations of what popular Black music ought to be. Those expectations, however, do not invariably come from the same source as the music. Rock critics (who are mostly white) liked *Thriller* well enough and wrote respectfully about it when it was released in December 1982, but they were as surprised as record company executives (who are mostly white) when the album started burning its way into the country's collective musical consciousness. The fine points of what *Thriller* might have been, and was not, seemed petty to the audiences (mostly young) who gave the record its initial push, who hip-hopped to it in clubs and breakdanced to it in the streets this past summer. The message is obvious, anyway: Soul is for sharing, not segregating.

Jackson knows his roots and reveres them. In one of his ascensions to the Grammy rostrum a couple of weeks ago, he leaned down to the microphone and announced, "I have something very important to say—really," and proceeded to thank and honor Jackie Wilson. Dead only five weeks before the awards from the side effects of a heart attack that had paralyzed him for almost a decade, Wilson was one of the greatest of all American soul singers. He sang high and hard, like Jackson, and also like him projected a dazzling sexual aura. Jackson's sexuality is more ethereal—Wilson in performance was like a tomcat—but both singers share a grounding in music that is almost equal parts soul and show biz.

Ray Charles, Little Richard, Chuck Berry, and Frankie Lymon were some of his contemporaries, but the singer who really knocked Jackie Wilson out was Al Jolson. Jackson may dance like Baryshnikov straddling a jackhammer, move like a street blood steeped in Astaire and tai chi, and sing like an angel on a soul-food bender, but a fair portion of his musical inspiration comes from the sort of glitzy places where soul seldom strays. One of his favorite things is "My Favorite Things" sung by Julie Andrews, raindrops on roses, warm woolen mittens, and all. He loves the Beatles, and he also loves Gordon MacRae booming his way through "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'."

Jackson cares so little about conventional standards of hipness that he can rise above embar-

Jackson with Jane Fonda on the day he was presented with the first Triple Platinum Award for Thriller. *Opposite: The singer backstage at the Grammys in 1984, when he won in eight categories.*

rassment on such matters of taste. His catholicity directs him straight to the vital center of contemporary pop culture. *Thriller* is an insinuating, invigorating album, but it is not the kind of great album one has come to expect since the tumultuous days of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*: a record that provokes, challenges, raises questions and laughs at answers. *Thriller* is not *Who's Next* or *The White Album* or *Blonde on Blonde* or *Songs in the Key of Life* or *Born to Run,* records that were argued over and championed like talismans that could change lives. It is like a piece of elegant sportswear: Slip right into it, shrug it off. Jackson has written and performed ebulliently with Paul McCartney; he often appears in bright band jackets; he has palled around a bit with Sean Ono Lennon and has taken him to a Broadway show. It should be clear from all of this that Jackson is smitten not only with the Beatles' legacy but with their mystique. Unlike the Beatles, however, he has a vast audience but a small constituency.

"If E.T. hadn't come to Elliott, he would have come to Michael's house."

—STEVEN SPIELBERG

In England now, rock is exploding in small bursts all over the place, but there is no single focus or figurehead for the movement, let alone the kind of triumvirate (Beatles-Stones-Who) that reigned during the mid-1960s. In America, there is Michael Jackson, with no clear movement behind him, just an unprecedented momentum that has sent him off on a dazzling solo flight. Stevie Wonder is still flourishing, and Lionel Richie is the most elegant songwriter in the neighborhood. Donna Summer can be spectacular; Prince is incandescent; Rick James is cataclysmic; rap groups are the rough conscience of the streets. But commercially and aesthetically, they all revolve in separate orbits that occasionally intersect. Jackson is a world apart, a phenomenon that exists in much the same way the star himself lives. In isolation.

Director Steven Spielberg has remarked that "if E.T. hadn't come to Elliott, he would have come to Michael's house." He reflects that Jackson is like a

hybrid of outer space's most famous tourist and of Chauncey Gardiner, the video-bedazzled innocent whom Peter Sellers portrayed in *Being There*. "I think Michael can be hurt very easily," Spielberg says. "He's sort of like a fawn in a burning forest." Jones watched Michael break down several times while recording "She's Out of My Life" for *Off the Wall* and eventually just left the crying on the track. Jackson also teared up repeatedly while recording the children's album *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*. During a break in a photo session for the album, Spielberg saw Jackson chatting and swapping gestures with E.T. "It's a nice place Michael comes from," Spielberg observes. "I wish we could all spend some time in his world."

That would require, as a visa, a disbelief willingly and perhaps perpetually suspended, a wariness of outsiders (Jackson has not given a print interview in more than a year), a capacity for gentleness, and a tolerance for fantasy that might tax the average adult imagination. Jackson lives at home in Encino, California, with his mother, father, and two youngest sisters. He supervised the recent redesign of the sprawling Tudor house, and the result is a cross between a vest-pocket Disneyland and *Citizen Kane*'s Xanadu in suburbia. The menagerie, the soda fountain, and the screening room are dream toys of childhood and the diversions of Southern California show-business affluence, all awash in the pastels of perennial boyhood. He takes trips to the Disney parks as to a shrine. He has spoken often about doing a movie musical of *Peter Pan*. The parallels are as obvious as they are misleading.

A good friend is right when he suggests that, ultimately, "Michael's appeal is universal less because of his music than because of who he is." Jackson has been in show business for most of his childhood and all of his adult life—there are those who argue persuasively that he has had no adult life—and, with a few other tricks, he has mastered the techniques of fusing his life with what is thought to be his image. This results in some arresting and deeply intriguing paradoxes: the thin young man, with bones as fragile as the veins in an autumn leaf, suddenly igniting on the downbeat and burning his way through to the hot, angry heart of "Billie Jean"; the boy who has an uncanny sense of what his audience wants and how to go about the hard and profitable business of giving it to them; the gentle, slightly self-mocking teenager in "Thriller" ("I've got somethin' I want to tell ya . . . I'm not like other guys") who turns into one of the grisliest werewolves in screen history and enjoys the transformation the way another adolescent might heat up on a first heavy date.

Many observers find in the ascendancy of Michael Jackson the ultimate personification of the androgynous rock star. His high-flying tenor makes him sound like the lead in some funked-up boys choir, even as the sexual dynamism irradiating from the arch of his dancing body challenges government standards for a nuclear meltdown. His lithe frame, five-fathom eyes, and long lashes might be threatening if Jackson gave, even for a second, the impression that he is obtainable. But the audience's sense of his sensuality becomes quite deliberately tangled

Marlon, Michael, Randy, and Jackie performed during the Jacksons' Victory Tour in 1984.

with the mirror image of his life: the good boy, the God-fearing Jehovah's Witness, the adamant vegetarian, the resolute non-indulger in smoke, strong drink, or dope of any kind, the impossibly insulated innocent. Undeniably sexy. Absolutely safe. Eroticism at arm's length.

Michael puts a sliding scale of value on distance. Director Sidney Lumet, with whom Jackson was staying when he starred in *The Wiz,* recalls that his teenage daughters once had some friends over, and one asked Michael to sing. "OK," Michael said affably. "But cover your eyes."

"I think he was embarrassed by the closeness of the situation," Lumet says, "but his desire not to be rude or to hurt her led him to say yes."

But there are also different kinds of occasions, when distance distorts. Jackson's enforced isolation is partly show-biz savvy and partly an attempt to preserve intact the fabric of his fantasy life. Inevitably, there are breaches. "You know, everybody thinks you're gay," vocal coach Seth Riggs told him one day during a break in a vocal lesson. "I know," Jackson laughed. "The other day a big, tall, blond, nice-looking fellow came up to me and said, 'Gee, Michael, I think you're wonderful. I sure would like to go to bed with you.' I looked at him and said, 'When's the last time you read the Bible? You know you really should read it, because there is some real information in there about homosexuality.' The guy says, 'I guess if I'd been a girl, it would

With Paul and Linda McCartney at the British Record Industry Awards in 1983. Jackson was there to support Paul, who won for British male solo artist, and also accepted an award for Barbra Streisand.

have been different.' And I said, 'No, there are some very direct words on that in the Bible too.'"

Misunderstandings like this can be compounded by the gutter press (MICHAEL JACKSON—MORE OF HIS INTIMATE SECRETS; MICHAEL'S AGONIZING TUG OF LOVE) and by the putative inside-track show-biz gossip. Jackson wants a sex-change operation; Jackson has gone under the knife for extensive plastic surgery; Jackson has been shot full of female hormones to keep his face pretty and his voice soaring high. "Not true," says Riggs. "I'm his voice teacher, and I'd know. He started out with a high voice, and I've taken it even higher. He can sing low—down to a basso low C—but he prefers to sing as high as he does because pop tenors have more range to create style." The power of gossip is such that it has penetrated the iron gates that surround the Jackson never-never land out in Encino. It takes no effort of imagination to calculate what talk like that must do to a proud father and a mother who is a devout churchwoman. In addition to his door-to-door field service, which, according to his mother, "he does twice a week, maybe for an hour or two," Michael attends meetings at a Kingdom Hall four times a week. On Sundays, he fasts.

And he dances. He shuts himself up at the house in a room that has no mirrors—"Mirrors make you pose," he has said—and cuts loose to his own music or to the Isley Brothers' *Showdown,* practicing what dancer Hinton Battle calls "moves that kill. It's the combinations that really distinguish him as an artist. Spin, stop, pull up leg, pull jacket open, turn, freeze. And the glide, where he steps forward while pushing back. Spinning three times and popping up on his toes. That's a trademark, and a move a lot of professionals wouldn't try. If you go up wrong, you can really hurt yourself."

Three old pros are fans too. "I think he's terrific," says director-choreographer Bob Fosse. "Clean, neat, fast, with a sensuality that comes through. Maybe he's more a synthesizer than an innovator, but it's never the steps that are most important. It's

the style. That's what Michael has." Gene Kelly talks about Jackson's "native histrionic intelligence and his great wit. He knows when to stop and then flash out like a bolt of lightning. There are a lot of dancers who can go 90 miles an hour, but Michael is too clever for just that." From Fred Astaire comes perhaps the ultimate tribute: "My lord, he is a wonderful mover. He makes these moves up himself, and it is just great to watch. I think he just feels that way when he is singing those songs. I don't know how much more dancing he will take up, because singing and dancing at the same time is very difficult. But Michael is a dedicated artist. He dreams, thinks of it all the time. You can see what the result is."

Show business accepts innocence only if it can be sentimentalized; Jackson's world of fantasy is easier to dismiss with malicious gossip than understand with sympathy. "On some level, I don't even know whether it's conscious or not, Michael knows that he has to stand off the demands of reality and protect himself," Jane Fonda points out. Jackson spent more than a week with Fonda on the set of *On Golden Pond*, talking far into the night about "acting, life, everything. Africa. Issues. We talked and talked and talked," Fonda says. "His intelligence is instinctual and emotional, like a child's. If any artist loses that childlikeness, you lose a lot of creative juice. So Michael creates around himself a world that protects his creativity." And the world outside is intrigued: about that rhinestone glove, for instance, that he has taken to affecting of late. Whatever their significance may be to Michael, gloves neatly, wittily—and, one hopes, consciously—deflect seriousness and reflect two of Michael's most publicized obsessions. A glove, even one with 1,200 rhinestones, suits Astaire-style topper and tails; it is also standard issue for many Disney cartoon characters.

In its fine details as well as in its broadest aspects, Michael Jackson's dream world has been under construction for 25 years, and its chief architect has not rested yet. Katherine Jackson likes to say her family got into show business because the only other available outlet for communal fantasy, the television, broke one day. "You know children; if they don't have TV to watch, then they have to do other things," she says. She may be oversimplifying some, but a blown-out television is not so readily replaced in the home of a Gary, Indana, steelworker with a large family to feed. "The dancing came natural," Katherine adds. Soon after, Joe Jackson began his intensive after-school coaching and practice sessions. Occasionally, as he recalls, the neighbor children lobbed stones through the Jacksons' window and shouted performance critiques through the shattered glass. When inspiration flagged, Michael, then 5, would step right in and, says his mother, "make all the moves." One year later, Michael was the lead singer and the boys were playing benefits and winning amateur contests.

Rufus Morgan, whose organization hired them to perform at a fundraiser for a firemen's ball, recalls, "Those boys were so fascinating to watch that everybody just gathered around the stage. We didn't dance. We watched and threw money." At Garnett Elementary School, principal Gladys Johnson invited the boys to perform at an assembly. (Admission: 10 cents. Proceeds were split with the Jackson family.) About 1,200 students turned out, and this time around, not a rock was thrown. "The children really enjoyed that show," Johnson remembers. "I could not believe how they idolized

During the filming of a Pepsi commercial in front of a live audience in Los Angeles in 1984, Jackson suffered severe burns to his scalp and face and was rushed to the hospital.

those Jackson 5 boys." Johnson also kept an eye on Michael's academics and once advised the fourth-grader to bone up on his math. "My manager will take care of my money," Michael replied.

By the time they cut a couple of singles for a local label called Steeltown in 1968, word of the young prodigies with a front man who could sing and move like Jackie Wilson had started to spread as far as Detroit and Motown. Calls were placed; connections were made. In November 1969, Motown released the first Jackson 5 single, "I Want You Back," with a propulsive vocal by Michael, 11. The record reached No. 1 in 12 weeks.

Over the next six years, the Jackson 5 became one of the cornerstone acts for a label that had more than its fair share of the best soul in the land. But after seven more Top 10 singles, there were the inevitable career dissatisfactions. Their father struck a deal with Epic Records, provoking bad feelings at Motown and some family tension. Jermaine, who had married Berry Gordy's daughter Hazel, stayed behind at Motown, soloing, while the other brothers moved on.

Now calling themselves the Jacksons (Motown retained title to the name Jackson 5), they proceeded to cut four albums, two of which (*Destiny* and *Triumph*) went platinum. But it was Michael's first Epic solo album, *Off the Wall*, that started to set the barns all burning. His excessive prominence within the family was always manageable, one senses, but not without stressing the importance of perspective. "Michael is pretty stable," his mother says. "I think it's his raisin'. We used to talk to the boys about getting big heads. None of them is better than anyone else. One might have a little more talent, but that doesn't make you better. You're just the same as anyone else. It's just a job. Other people might be doctors and lawyers, but Michael entertains because maybe that's what he can do best. That doesn't mean he's better."

What it does mean, however, is living your life on guard, within tantalizing reach of platoons of adoring fans who stake out the gates of the Encino house starting at 4 a.m. or so. It means bringing home the hospital gown you wore after the accident during the Pepsi commercial and letting it be tossed over the fence, to be caught by one of the most adoring of the faithful, Dena Cypher, 16. "I look at it every night, smell it, all that good stuff," she reports. "I was going to wear it to bed, but my mom talked me out of it. We didn't want to wrinkle it. I mean, those are Michael's wrinkles in there."

Beguiling as the comparisons are between the extraterrestrial and Michael, the earthly, slightly spacey superstar, what may be most pertinently recalled about *E.T.* is the way in which the family's house is suddenly closed by outside forces, turned from a home into a hermetically sealed fortress. Spielberg talks about the "rage" he senses when he watches Jackson in concert, and the impression of angry release. Jackson, in front of an audience, is like a projectile—alive, explosive—that always returns, charge intact, to the chamber from which it was fired.

"Michael is pretty stable.... We used to talk to the boys about getting big heads. None of them is better than anyone else."

—KATHERINE JACKSON

Jackson's whole existence is lined with insulation. His friends, many of whom are famous, help him keep life at bay and illusion near at hand. Their celebrity, which complements his, also helps cast his everyday life with the living embodiments of public fantasy. "We might think his bubble world is fantastical," says one of his most sympathetic pals. "But to him it's very real. My only fear is that he'll step out and become like everybody else. He is too special the way he is. He is not immune. If he steps out of that world, it might be his last time."

Still, even a fan like Amy Gancherov, 13, of nearby Sherman Oaks, can sometimes notice, as she catches a phantom glimpse of Jackson, that "he looks so sad." She thinks the reason may be that "everybody is always shoving things in his face." Occasionally, Jackson comes out to the yard. Sometimes he will ride a red-and-white motor scooter. Sometimes he will take his electric car for a spin. It is a close copy of a vehicle from Mr. Toad's Wild Ride at Disneyland. Outside the iron gates, the fans on the street can see him whizzing along the driveway, playing by himself, and at those times, he is too far away for anyone to see his face at all. ●

Reported by Denise Worrell/Los Angeles, with other bureaus

I Want My MJTV

Jackson was so key to MTV's success, fans incorporated his initials into the network's name.

BY EILEEN DASPIN

Quincy Jones, worried people would confuse "Billie Jean" with tennis player Billie Jean King, wanted to change the song's name to "Not My Lover." Jackson refused.

IF MTV REVOLUTIONIZED THE music industry when it launched in 1981, injecting video and visuals into album marketing, Michael Jackson in turn transformed MTV, making the financially uncertain upstart a global style arbiter and money-minting machine.

In MTV's earliest days, many conservative cable operators refused to carry its programming on grounds that the videos promoted drugs and bad behavior. The station made inroads slowly, attracting recording artists including Pat Benatar, the Who, REO Speedwagon, the Pretenders, and Phil Collins, yet with videos that were "shockingly bad," as Nina Blackwood, an MTV VJ from 1981 to 1986, told *Billboard* in 2009. Then came March 1983's "Billie Jean," the second single from Michael Jackson's *Thriller,* in which Jackson danced through a surreal *Blade Runner*–like landscape attempting to evade a fictional paparazzo.

"Billie Jean" was groundbreaking on multiple fronts. Visually, with its cinematic storytelling, the video was not simply footage of a singer singing but a self-contained movie. The choreography—as in Jackson's moonwalk—was next level, and on the style front, "Billie Jean" introduced the crystal glove, the sequined black jacket, and the white socks.

"Billie Jean" also elevated run-of-the-mill song releases into cultural events and proved to MTV programmers—who up until then had aired Black artists only sparingly—that their audience would tune in to watch a Jackson or Prince or Whitney Houston or Lionel Ritchie. (After the fact, it was revealed that it took CBS Records president Walter Yetnikoff's behind-the-scenes arm-twisting to get Jackson's "Billie Jean" into heavy rotation.) The song rocketed to the top of the charts and stayed there for more than seven weeks. The following December, when Jackson released the almost 14-minute "Thriller" video, with its now-iconic zombie dance, Vincent Price voice-over, and visual terrors and delights, MTV's viewership took off. VCRs had not yet gone mainstream, so viewers were setting their alarm clocks in the middle of the day to turn the channel on and catch the "Thriller" video. ''Every time we played it," said MTV cofounder John Sykes, "We would see ratings double or triple."

Those numbers influenced acts such as Madonna and ZZ Top to invest in videos, which helped increase album sales. The higher quality in turn helped increase MTV's cachet with advertisers and audiences. "It was the ultimate symbiotic relationship—we made him, he made us," Mark Goodman, an early MTV VJ, told *Billboard.* "[Jackson], with the help of CBS Records [the corporate parent of Epic and Columbia], kind of forced us to realize there was a change going on in music."

A Monster Smash

Thriller, the best-selling album of all time, was a sonic mind meld between Michael Jackson and Quincy Jones that borrowed from jazz, pop, marching bands, and bar mitzvah music.

BY ANDREW R. CHOW

FORTY-THREE YEARS AFTER ITS RELEASE, Michael Jackson's *Thriller* remains a towering pillar of American culture: the best-selling album of all time, and the gold standard to which all pop artists aspire. *Thriller* spent 37 nonconsecutive weeks at No. 1 and set the record for most top 10 singles from an album with seven. It has since sold over 70 million copies around the world.

But its success was far from inevitable: The project faced many barriers to its astonishing rise, most centrally related to lingering doubts from executives about how widely a Black R&B artist could resonate. Those barriers were overcome by the insatiable drive and genius of two men: Jackson and Quincy Jones, a formidable impresario in music and TV for decades before he paired up with Jackson, a former child prodigy struggling with his pivot into adulthood. *Thriller* cemented Jackson's stardom as a solo artist while serving as the culmination of Jones' talents.

BUILDING A NEW POP SOUND

Jones started producing for Jackson on his 1979 album *Off the Wall,* his fifth solo release outside of his work with the Jackson 5. Jackson's previous solo albums had failed to cross over to diverse audiences, so he and Jones hoped to win over the mainstream through a reimagining of disco, imbuing the genre with synthesizers and electronic drum grooves.

Off the Wall was a massive hit, but its critical acclaim was capped due to the music industry's rigid conceptions of race and genre. The Grammys

The groundbreaking 14-minute video for "Thriller" was directed by John Landis and won MTV 10 times its usual audience figures.

pigeonholed it into R&B genres, failing to nominate any of its megahits—including "Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough" and "Rock with You"—for record of the year or song of the year. Jackson complained about *Rolling Stone* passing him over for a cover story in 1980: "I've been told over and over that Black people on the cover of magazines doesn't sell copies. . . . Just wait," he said.

Jones and Jackson wanted their follow-up to be bigger—for every song on the album to be an undeniable smash. "To penetrate, you have to go for the throat in four, five, six different areas: rock, AC [adult contemporary], R&B, soul," Jones told *Rolling Stone* in 2009.

In their gamesmanship, Jones and Jackson first turned to a hitmaker they presumed white radio wouldn't dare snub: Paul McCartney. Jones and Jackson wanted to create an easy-listening pop hit replicating the success of McCartney and Stevie Wonder's "Ebony and Ivory" in a way that might expand Jackson's global appeal to Beatles-level heights. The resulting single, "The

Girl Is Mine," wasn't well received by critics; McCartney himself called it shallow. But while some radio DJs declined to play the song because of its implications of interracial romance, the gambit worked: The song hit No. 2 on the pop chart, priming the world for the album's crossover ambitions.

The rest of *Thriller* would possess a similar clear sonic aura: sleek, glittery, tightly wound. To create this specificity, Jones pulled from his deep knowledge of music theory and music history. As a teen, he had cut his teeth as a jazz trumpeter in Seattle alongside Ray Charles, later going on to arrange songs for Frank Sinatra, Dinah Washington, and Count Basie. One of Jones' priorities was to imbue Jackson's music with jazz language and sensibilities, even while aiming for the top of the charts. "Baby Be Mine," for instance, was a clear homage to John Coltrane.

In addition to jazz, Jones wanted to borrow from "bar mitzvah music, Sousa marches, strip-club music, pop," as he told *Vulture* in 2018. As a result, the musical inspirations on *Thriller* span decades and countries. "Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'" for example, interpolates Cameroonian musician Manu Dibango's 1972 single "Soul Makossa." (Dibango was unhappy that he was not credited, but they worked out a financial agreement.)

As Jones pulled from music history, he also lived on the cutting edge of pop. He brought the vanguard of 1980s musicians into the studio, including Toto—whose song "Africa" was just making its way up the charts—for "Human Nature" and the '80s rock

Jackson with Paul McCartney (left); Jones and Jackson hoped he would get Thriller *onto white radio. Top: Eddie Van Halen recording his "Beat It" solo.* Thriller *won a record eight Grammys.*

god Eddie Van Halen, who respected Jones so much that he refused payment for his legendary guitar solo on "Beat It."

Jones was also influenced by a new album from a young rising star: Prince's *1999*. *Thriller* synthesizer player Brian Banks later reminisced about how Jones played the title song for them upon its release and told them he wanted its "big, bitey chord sound," but "bigger." That sound ended up kicking off the album's title track, "Thriller"—and preceded a decades-long rivalry between the two icons.

Thriller's sound was hypercharged by Jones' embrace of the newest music technology, including synthesizers and drum machines. "We had so much gear that we couldn't even put the trunks, all the boxes, in the hallways," Anthony Marinelli, a keyboardist, told the BBC. All in all, Jones used some 62 musicians and 22 singers on *Thriller*. He and Jackson worked relentlessly to make the album perfect, staying up for days and nights.

ENTER MTV

But the duo was also aware that the music was only one component of making a mega-smash. Jones had long been a part of the TV and film world, scoring soundtracks for many films and TV shows in the '60s and '70s. As a result, he knew how music and visuals could coalesce into cultural moments—one reason he brought on horror actor Vincent Price for a spooky spoken-word sequence on the title track.

Meanwhile, a new force was rising rapidly in the music industry: MTV. But the television channel rarely played Black musicians. When it passed on airing Rick James' "Super Freak," MTV founder Bob Pittman tried to explain the choice by saying, "It has nothing to do with race, but with sound." Despite this resistance, Jackson and Jones were hell-bent on getting onto the channel and spent lavishly on movie-quality music videos that showed off Jackson's charisma. Jackson paid $150,000 out of his own pockeet for the "Beat It" music video. Eventually, and thanks in part to threats from Jackson's studio executives to MTV, the channel put "Billie Jean" into heavy rotation. The 14-minute "Thriller" video, directed by John Landis, followed, giving MTV 10 times its usual ratings. Its hand forced, MTV also began playing Black artists such as Lionel Richie and Prince.

Ultimately, *Thriller* was just one small part of Quincy Jones' astonishing career, which went on to include the soundtrack to *The Color Purple* and "We Are the World." He ranks third on the list of most Grammys won of all time and belongs to the elite group of EGOT winners, people who have won an Emmy, Grammy, Oscar, and Tony (in his case, an honorary one, thanks to two honorary Oscars). But *Thriller's* audacity, quality, and universal appeal revealed the height of Jones' powers.

"*Thriller* was a combination of all my experience as an orchestrator and picking the songs and Michael's—all the talents he had as a dancer, as a singer, as an amazing entertainer," Jones told NPR's Fresh Air in 2013. "It was like us throwing everything we'd accumulated as experience and putting it all together."

Netflix's The Greatest Night in Pop *celebrated the making of "We Are the World," which gathered the biggest names in pop in one room.*

The Greatest Night in Pop

In 2024, on the cusp of the 40th anniversary of the charity single "We Are the World," TIME considered the Netflix special documenting the recording session that produced the smash track.

BY OLIVIA B. WAXMAN

ON JANUARY 28, 1985, 45 OF THE biggest names in music, from Stevie Wonder to Bruce Springsteen, came together in a Los Angeles recording studio to record the charity single "We Are the World."

On the cusp of the 40th anniversary of the session, a Netflix documentary, *The Greatest Night in Pop,* showed how the historic gathering came together. Participants interviewed include Cyndi Lauper, Kenny Loggins, Lionel Richie, Smokey Robinson, and Dionne Warwick. The documentary combines video footage from USA for Africa and audio recorded by David Breskin, who wrote the LIFE magazine article about the session. Director Bao Nguyen and an editor, Nic Zimmermann, synced some of Breskin's dictaphone audio to

footage of the recording session from USA for Africa that was missing audio.

"We Are the World" was inspired by "Do They Know It's Christmas?," the 1984 charity single recorded by some of the most popular British and Irish musicians to raise money to end famine in Ethiopia. The performers were predominantly white, and legendary artist and civil rights activist Harry Belafonte thought that top Black stars needed to be included in a comparable track. "'We have white folks saving Black folks. We don't have Black folks saving Black folks,'" said Lionel Richie in the documentary, paraphrasing how Belafonte pitched the project to him. "'We need to save our own people from hunger.' He was trying to get us, the younger group, involved in what was happening in Africa. I said, 'Of course.'"

Belafonte worked with top managers and producers in Hollywood like Ken Kragen and Quincy Jones to reach out to the featured music stars. They knew many would be in Los Angeles for the American Music Awards that Richie was hosting, so the recording session took place right afterward. The biggest revelation in the documentary is Sheila E., who performed with Prince, claiming she was invited to participate because the producers thought Prince would come if she was there. She explained what it was like to be in the room, waiting for a solo: "It was getting late, and I was looking forward to singing one of the verses, but they kept asking, 'Well, do you think you can get Prince here?' And I'm like, 'Wow. This is weird.' And I just started feeling like, 'I'm being used because they want Prince to show up, and the longer they keep me, maybe Prince will show up.'" She said she knew he wasn't going to come because he'd feel uncomfortable among all of those people, and she called the night "heartbreaking" overall.

Richie and Michael Jackson cowrote "We Are the World," and Richie credits Jackson for coming up with the titular line "We are the world." But some of the featured singers also played a key role in produc-

The Greatest Night in Pop *captured (counterclockwise from top left) Dionne Warwick and Stevie Wonder; Jackson and Bob Dylan; Huey Lewis, Quincy Jones, and Jackson; Lionel Richie and Cyndi Lauper; and Willie Nelson, Jones, and Bruce Springsteen.*

ing the song during a hectic recording session. For example, Bob Dylan was struggling with his line, uncomfortable with the packed room. He called Stevie Wonder over to help him, and Wonder sat at the piano and sang it the way he thought Dylan should sing it, mimicking the indie artist's folksy voice. Dylan went on to nail his section.

The song was an instant hit. In the March 25, 1985, issue of TIME, the magazine rattled off a list of stats that show the single was shaping up to be "the smash of the decade." Tower Records' Sunset Boulevard store in West Hollywood sold 1,000 copies in two days, compared to about 100 to 125 copies in a given week. TIME argued that what's most notable about the song is how "musicians from rival factions of the business are seen putting aside differences of style and temperament and coming together to share and spread a little decency." The story even urged readers to buy it, writing, "The song is sappy and overextended, but go ahead and tell that to the teenagers who are buying five copies at a time at Tower Records, then giving them to their friends on condition they each go out and buy five more. Go ahead. Tell them. Then buy a record."

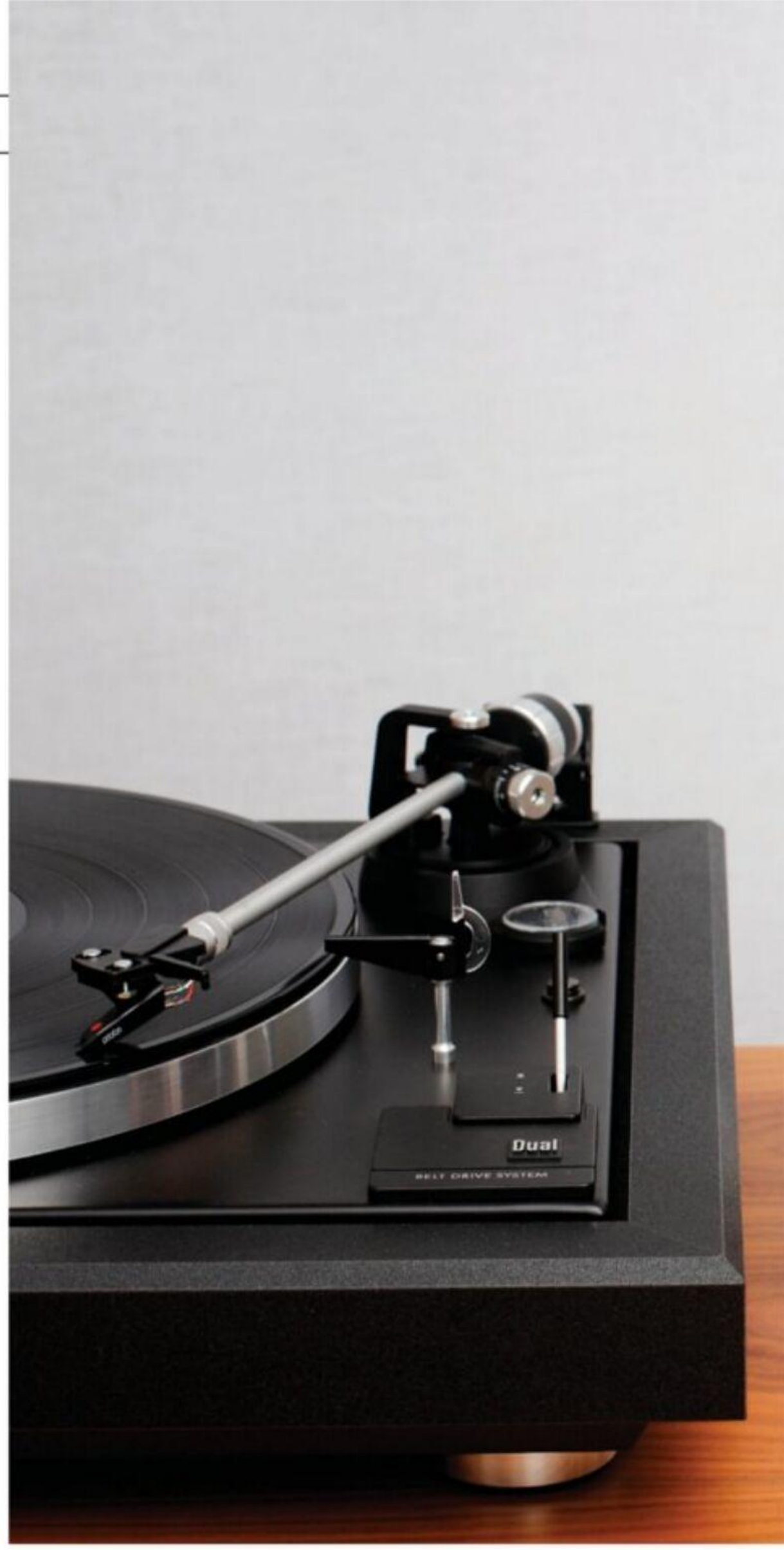
Most of the "We Are the World" proceeds went to USA for Africa—short for United Support of Artists for Africa—which was raising money to end poverty on the continent, while 10 percent was set aside for efforts to combat homelessness in the U.S., per Wonder's request.

Could there be a 21st-century version of "We Are the World"? Top TikTok influencers all in the same studio recording a video for charity? That remains to be seen, but Nguyen is optimistic. As he put it, "I do hope the film and the song inspire a younger generation to maybe try something like this."

An Oral History of Michael Jackson's *Bad*

In 2012, as the 25th anniversary of the album approached, TIME examined the creation and legacy of the record-setting release.

BY LILY ROTHMAN



MICHAEL JACKSON RELEASED THE album *Bad* on August 31, 1987. It had been five years since *Thriller*, the album that had arguably established the pop star as a visionary and that would go on to set the record for the most copies sold of a single album.

The quest to match *Thriller* would be a hard one. But despite (or perhaps because of) that burden, Jackson was more involved than ever in *Bad*'s artistic process. "When you would work with him, you could just see the way his mind worked," said Matt Forger, who engineered the record. "He knew exactly what he was looking for." Under the shadow of *Thriller,* and despite the backlash against some of Jackson's personal eccentricities that came to light around that time, *Bad* set records of its own. It was the first album to send five consecutive singles ("I Can't Stop Loving You," "Bad," "The Way You Make Me Feel," "Man in the Mirror," and "Dirty Diana") to the top of the Billboard charts, and it held that record until 2011.

Bad's quarter-century milestone was marked with due pomp. Jackson's estate and Epic/Legacy Recordings collaborated on a three-CD release, *BAD 25*, which included the remastered original album plus an album of additional tracks, including demos and remixes, and a live album. The package also included a DVD of never-before-seen concert foot-

age—Jackson's own review copy of a July 16, 1988, concert at Wembley Stadium. In addition, a Spike Lee–helmed documentary about the album, the similarly titled *Bad 25,* debuted that August at the Venice Film Festival.

In honor of the seminal album's anniversary, TIME spoke (in separate interviews, with the exception of Greg Phillinganes and Forger) to people who were there and people living out the album's legacy: musician Phillinganes, who worked on the record and music directed the Bad tour; Forger, who worked on *Bad*; Spike Lee, who directed *Bad 25* as well as Jackson's short film for the song "They Don't Care About Us"; John Branca, Jackson's lawyer and co-executor of his estate; and Nick Leonardus van der Wall, aka Afrojack , a DJ who remixed a new version of "Bad" for the anniversary release.

MEETING MICHAEL

"HE KNEW EVERYTHING THAT HAD TO HAPPEN IN A SONG."

LEE: I followed Michael Jackson since he was the young kid with the Jackson 5. I was born in

1957 and he was born in 1958, so we're literally the same generation.

AFROJACK: I turn 25 in September. My mom used to own her own dancing school, and she did a lot of choreography of the Michael Jackson songs. I used to be a little bit of a dancer myself, but just for fun. That's when I first heard of it, through my baby years.

FORGER: The first time I met Michael was on a Quincy Jones session. I was working with Quincy Jones, and we were doing a Donna Summer album, and we had to take a break in the middle of doing the record because that was the only time Michael Jackson and Paul McCartney were able to schedule free time to be in the studio. That was for the recording of "The Girl Is Mine," the first song for the *Thriller* album.

BRANCA: Michael and I first met in January of 1980. He was looking to have his own team. I think he was 21 at the time. I became his lawyer. He had just released *Off the Wall,* so during that period, I renegotiated his recording agreement, and then he started to work on *Thriller.*

FORGER: At that time, he was reserved, he was rather quiet, but at the same time extremely focused. He knew everything that had to happen in a song. He was very directed, very in tune with where all the parts musically needed to be. He was very professional, very well prepared.

THE MAKING OF *BAD*

"HE WAS THE ARCHITECT OF THE ALBUM IN EVERY SENSE OF THE WORD."

FORGER: *Thriller* really reinforced Michael's confidence. He had written four of the songs off the album, and those songs turned into hits. Michael knew he was on the right track. By the time *Bad* came around, it was just ready for him to step up and take a much larger role because it was his time. He was ready.

BRANCA: I remember having a conversation with him, and I was kind of kidding, and I said, "Michael, maybe for the next album, instead of trying to top yourself and compete with yourself, maybe you should go a little left of center and think about something a little different, like making an album of the songs that inspired you to become an artist. Songs by James Brown, Sly and the Family Stone, and others." He looked at me like I was from Mars.

LEE: The greatest people, the greatest artists, whatever you want to call that category, they work at their craft for years and years and years. So often we think it comes, we don't see the hard work that goes into all that. We see the creation, we see the beauty of the hard work, but we don't see the hard work, the blood, sweat, and tears.

PHILLINGANES: We had family pet day, where he brought down Muscles the Boa and Bubbles the Chimp and we took pictures. There's a group picture I have a couple shots of, it's Studio D of Westlake, and we're all standing in a long row to accommodate Muscles. How long was he?

FORGER: Well, he grew. I first met Muscles during *Thriller,* and he was probably about 10 or 12 feet long, so he must have been at least 16 feet by the time *Bad* rolled around. He was a very nice snake.

PHILLINGANES: And during some downtime in the studio. . . . Mike was getting restless, and he asked me if I felt like going across the street to do a little shopping. What was across the street was a huge shopping mall called the Beverly Center. He puts on this wig and dark sunglasses and crooked teeth and we come out of the studio, just the two of us, no security, no cops, nobody . . . and I remember thinking that time, "I'm crossing La Cienega with Michael Jackson, and nobody knows." We went all over the place and did a bit of shopping, and he had slightly puzzled looks from cashiers. He looked like Sly Stone on crack, and then he gets out the credit card and they go, "No!"

FORGER: When you were with Michael, you always

had this sense of enjoyment, of energy, and whatever it was Michael wanted to do, he wanted to enjoy himself when he was doing it.

PHILLINGANES: By the time we were working on *Bad,* Mike's ideas became stronger and clearer. Songs like "Al Capone," titles like that, even as working titles, show that Mike had a tremendous cinematic approach to the making of his music.

FORGER: Michael always wanted to be a storyteller. He wanted a beginning, a middle, and an end, and he wanted it to be a story, and it could be translated not only into a song but a terrific what Michael always called "film shorts," as opposed to "music videos."

LEE: When it came to work, he was a perfectionist. He's not going to say, "I'm tired"—he's not going to say anything. Until it's done, he's like, "Let's go, let's get it done, let's do the best we can, let's not cut any corners." Whether it's creatively or financially, he was not cutting any corners.

FORGER: It wouldn't be uncommon that a track would be recorded several times, either the tempo or the key or the arrangement, until you absolutely got the exact right thing. When you're working with people of this caliber and you're adjusting these parameters and when you get the right one, it just feels like that's it. Everyone understands right away when you've got the right formula.

THE RELEASE OF *BAD*

"ONE HUNDRED MILLION. HE'D WRITE THAT ON THE MIRROR AND LOOK AT IT EVERY DAY."

BRANCA: I think Michael was really pleased with that album. It was a real coming out, artistically.

PHILLINGANES: You hear it on the radio all the time and you obviously feel good about the final product, but it's not like you go, "Right, this is going to [sell] 50 million right now." The sales dictate that, but it's all after the fact . . . though Mike would write a certain number of sales on his mirror every day as motivation. One hundred million. He'd write that on the mirror and look at it every day.

LEE: During that period, Michael had become so popular that it just seemed there was a natural

Martin Scorsese directed the 18-minute video for "Bad," filmed in New York City in 1986 (below). Opposite: Known for his unusual pets, Jackson posed with Muscles, his boa constrictor, in 1984.

backlash toward him and this album, which is unfortunate, because the album still stands today as a great piece of work.

BRANCA: In addition to [*Thriller*] being the biggest-selling record in history, culturally Michael had a huge impact. I helped him buy the Beatles catalog at that time, and there was a backlash against his success. There was nowhere in the world you could go where Michael wasn't known and wasn't famous.

LEE: Oh yeah. "Wacko Jacko." Cover of the *New York Post*. I don't have the same mentality as the *New York Post*.

BRANCA: The album was great. And you have Martin Scorsese directing the first video! At that time, 1987, other than the fact that we had gotten John Landis to direct "Thriller," the notion that you would have an all-time Hall of Fame movie director. . . . That alone told all of us this was going to be a huge album.

AFROJACK: On the *Bad* album, the best track is "Bad." Now everyone's talking about being gangster or being mafia or whatever, but back then it was just really simple. Michael Jackson was bad. That's it.

BRANCA: *Bad* was the only album in history until recently to have five consecutive No. 1 singles. It had nine Top 10 singles. Forty-five million albums. It broke new ground in terms of videos . . . and what he did with Martin Scorsese on "Bad" and Colin Chilvers on "Smooth Criminal" helped advance the art form of making music videos. So I think by every measure, *Bad* was an enormously and historically successful album. By Michael's own standards? That's another question.

THE LEGACY OF *BAD*

"IT WAS ARGUABLY THE MOST TRANSITIONAL POINT IN ESTABLISHING HIS MUSICAL INDEPENDENCE."

LEE: The legacy of the album is you have two legacies. It has something that *Thriller* doesn't have: five No. 1 consecutive singles. But number two is that it was the album that followed up *Thriller,* the biggest-selling album of all time.

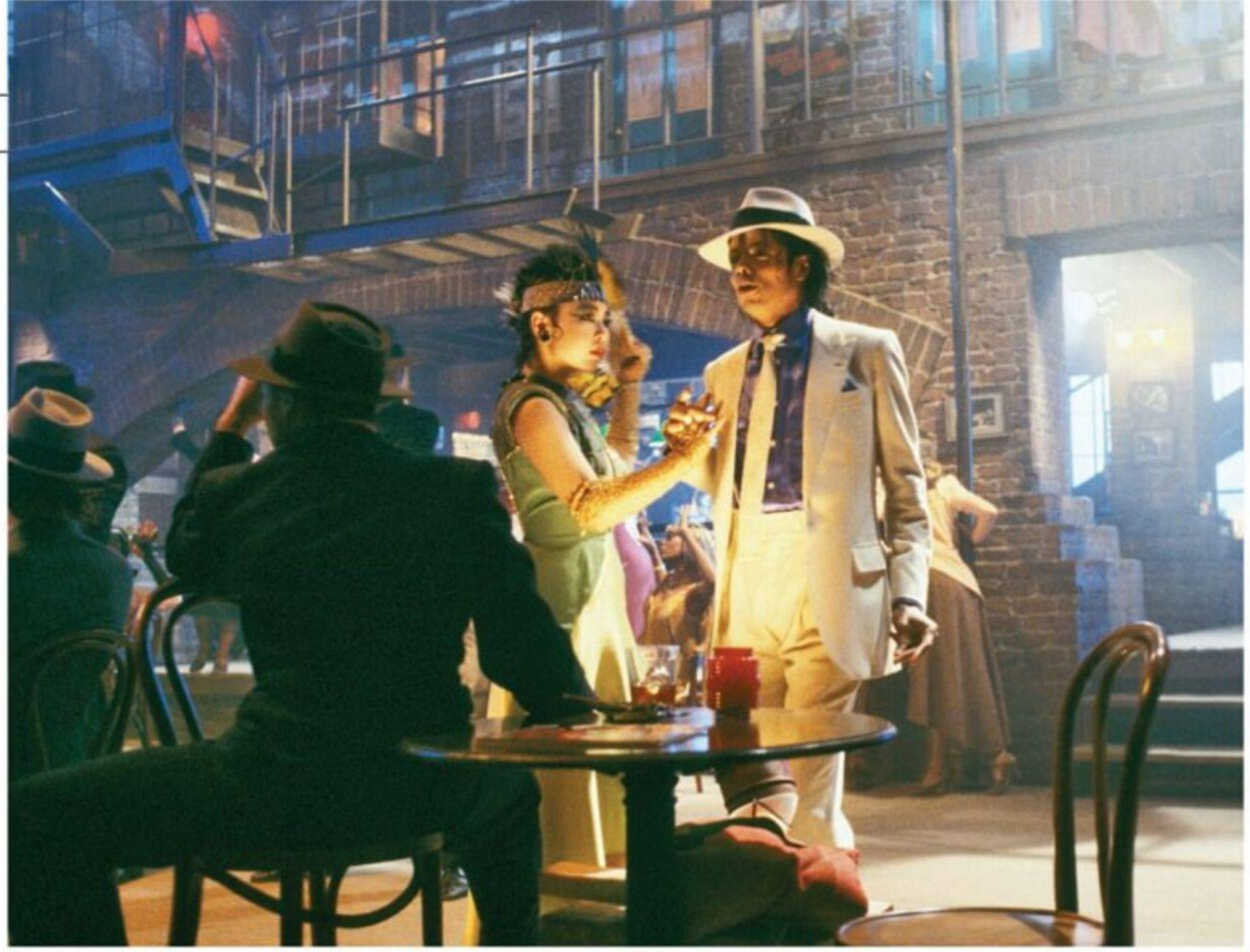
PHILLINGANES: It was a wild ride. I do remember [the concerts at] Wembley. Princess Di showed up, and Michael, that lucky dog, got to be in the receiving line. We could see her pretty well in her bright yellow dress, sitting in her box. Tons of people showed up. Naomi Campbell. Eric Clapton. Phil Collins. Barry Gibb. They were all there.

FORGER: For me, it really was that point in time when Michael took the reins of his solo career and you could understand Michael's personality musically. It's not that you couldn't before that, it's just that in his solo career now he had taken all of the encouragement that Quincy [Jones] had given him, and it was just that extension. This was it happening.

PHILLINGANES: It was arguably the most transitional point in establishing his musical independence. The songs speak for themselves. It was a well-rounded collection of great songs.

FORGER: What I come away with from the *Bad* album is, ironically, one of the songs that Michael did not write, and that's "Man in the Mirror." "Man in the Mirror" to me totally represents that place that Michael started directing his energy to. You start to really see where Michael's heart is, where his soul is, what his intent was for, what he would like to accomplish with his music. . . .

BRANCA: Clearly, Michael is an artist whose popularity will live on for generations. It's funny—I was talking to Spike Lee about this—some artists are great singers but they don't write their songs, and some artists are great songwriters but they're not excellent vocalists, or they can't dance. You look at Michael, and he could write the songs, he could produce them, he could sing them, he could get out and perform and dance them, and then his sense of style sort of changed fashion trends. He's a unique artist in that respect.



In 1988's "Smooth Criminal," Jackson faced off against a drug lord (played by Joe Pesci) and introduced the seemingly impossible anti-gravity lean. Opposite: In London with Princess Diana the same year.

LEE: To be honest, over the years, *Bad* has grown in stature. . . . Sometimes you don't get s--t when it comes out right away. We cannot overemphasize: *Bad* was a follow-up to the greatest single selling album in the history of human civilization. You cannot overemphasize that.

BAD 25

THE ANNIVERSARY PACKAGE

BRANCA: [My co-executor, John McClain and I,] we always approach things based on the kind of decisions we think Michael would make, what he would be looking for. . . . We found some interesting notes that Michael had for some of the short films on the album, for example, for "Smooth Criminal," we found a sketch that Michael did for the outfits that are worn by Michael and the dancers in the short film. . . . And we found his notes from when he was conceiving the idea for the "Smooth Criminal" short film, where he was studying the works of Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly.

FORGER: I mixed "Don't Be Messin' Round" and "Free" and the one which is called "Song Groove (aka Abortion Papers)." These were tracks where all of the material had already been recorded. Nothing was added, nothing was recorded, it was just going through and taking the tapes that hadn't had an appropriate mix and just doing a representative final mix of the way Michael would have wanted the songs to sound.

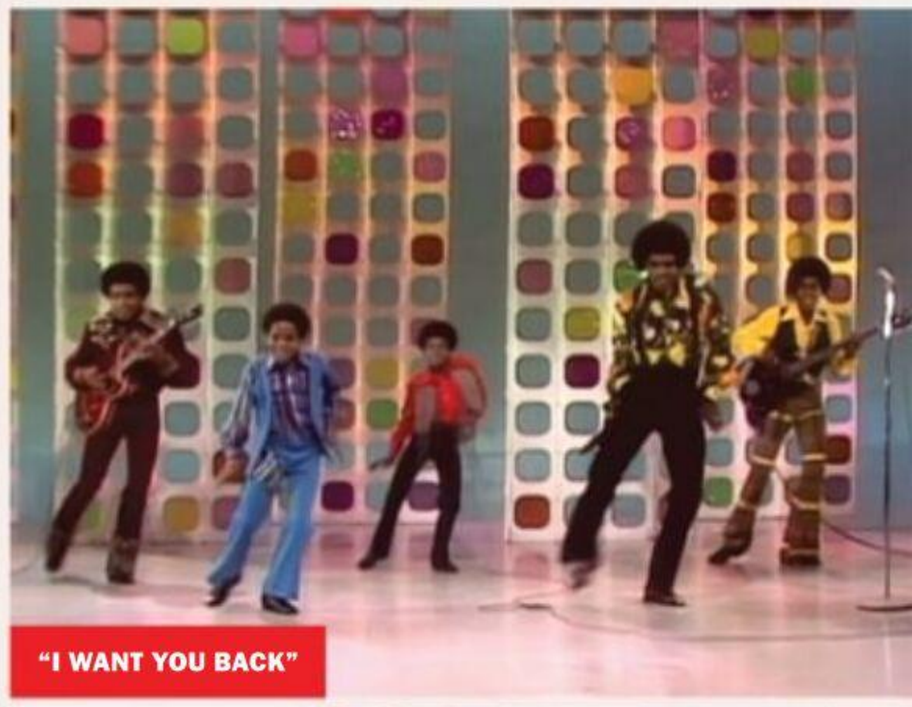
BRANCA: In the shadow of *Thriller, Bad* is perhaps underappreciated. I don't think people realize how many hit singles came from that album. This will really be a statement that will remind everybody how important, how influential that album was.

FORGER: The bonus tracks that are included on this album, I think, show a terrific insight into more of that thing that Michael was experiencing at that point in time, the musical ideas he was developing. . . . In some cases, some of the tracks are a little bit more raw, which to me is exciting because when you get to hear it a little bit more raw . . . you get a little bit more of the personality and the emotion that goes into the process.

LEE: I think Michael would love this. You might say, how could I say that? But I'm telling you, I think he would love what we did with this. We told the truth, and we featured his work. It's not anything but his work, anything but his music and how this album was made. This is about the creative project. It's about why he felt he was put on earth, to make music. That's what this is about. Nothing else.

A Catalog of Greats

Jackson's most celebrated songs include hat tips and riffs from across time and continents. Think Eddie Van Halen's guitar solo in "Billie Jean," Manu Dibango's refrain "Mama-se, mama-sa, mama-coo-sa" in "Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'," and the gospel choir in "Man in the Mirror."



"I WANT YOU BACK"

"I'LL BE THERE"

"I Want You Back" 1969

Even with everything we know about Jackson as an adult, only a person with the hardest of hearts could hear the chord progression of the Jackson 5's greatest song and not get up and dance. The effortlessness with which Jackson fuses the influence of Sly Stone and James Brown with his own innocent yelping is part of the appeal, but the whole song flies by with a whimsy and sweetness that was Jackson's calling card well into his mid-20s.

"ABC" 1970

Cementing the Jackson 5's superstardom after "I Want You Back," "ABC," pure bubblegum soul, was an instant classic. It knocked the Beatles' "Let it Be" from the top of the charts and sold millions almost immediately. The song's simple and catchy hooks—"A-B-C. It's easy as 1-2-3, as simple as Do-Re-Mi"—defined the Jackson 5's sound while showcasing 11-year old Michael's phenomenal voice and star power.

"I'll Be There" 1970

After three upbeat hits, this Berry Gordy–cowritten ballad was the Jackson 5's first serious track, and it turned out to be one of its most successful. Michael and Jermaine share the lead vocals, but it's Michael who has the memorable lines, opening with "You and I must make a pact"—he sounds almost too young to know what the word *pact* might mean—and the ad-libbed ender, "Just look over your shoulders, honey," a reference to the Four Tops' "Reach Out, I'll Be There."

"Never Can Say Goodbye" 1971

At 12, Michael's voice is noticeably deeper than on earlier Jackson 5 songs—and deeper than on a lot of his later solo stuff too. In the verse, he ramps up the emotion gradually, easing his way up the scale until he bursts into the chorus, hitting all the high notes with astounding clarity.

"Ben" 1972

This song about a rat, from the 1972 film of the same name, was originally offered to Donny Osmond. That tells you all you need to know about the quality of the composition. The vocal is another story. In classic style, Jackson, 14 at the time of its release, invests just enough to make you believe that he and Ben have "both found what we were looking for," but his restraint is just as powerful. Every note is clean and understated, giving "Ben" a dignity far above its station.

"Shake Your Body (Down to the Ground)" 1979

One of MJ's first attempts at writing and leading a smash hit, "Shake Your Body" sampled Marvin Gaye's "Got to Give It Up" and had an infectious groove and catchy chorus that turned it into a dance-floor staple. It was performed by all five Jackson brothers for their 1978 album *Destiny* and remains a pure call to celebrate and go for love—and an instant party-starter.

"Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough" 1979

This was the first song Jackson had full creative control over as a singer

"BEN"

"DON'T STOP 'TIL YOU GET ENOUGH"

"BEAT IT"

and songwriter, and it proved he was more than just a sweet kid. (His mother, a Jehovah's Witness, was reportedly shocked at the sexual entendre in the title.) "Don't Stop" came out squarely at the end of the disco era, yet it's so filled with energy and instruments—trumpet, flugelhorn, electric piano—that it doesn't sound the least bit dated. No self-respecting wedding DJ goes anywhere without it.

"The Girl Is Mine" 1982

A talent trifecta—the song was written by Jackson, produced by Quincy Jones, and sung by Jackson and Paul McCartney—"The Girl Is Mine," from *Thriller,* was charming, silly, and sold more than 1.3 million copies in its first two years. The story goes that Jones came up with the idea of two men fighting over a girl and pitched the concept to Jackson, who liked it and wrote the lyrics while watching cartoons with McCartney. Oddly, according to *American Songwriter,* Jackson never performed "The Girl Is Mine" live.

"Beat It" 1983

Jackson never got much credit for being a pioneer, but his melding of rock and R&B preceded the meeting of Run-DMC and Aerosmith by four years. Besides featuring one of the best guitar solos in pop history (provided free of charge by Eddie Van Halen, in a move his accountant no doubt regrets), "Beat It" is the best example of Jackson's ability to bridge moods and genres. It's tense and spooky, it rocks, and yet you can't help but to dance to it. It's Jackson's best.

"Billie Jean" 1983

Based on a real-life incident in which a woman accused Jackson of fathering her twins ("She says I am the one/But the kid is not my son"), the song almost didn't make it onto *Thriller* because Quincy Jones hated its signature lick: the bass line.

"BILLIE JEAN"

"THE WAY YOU MAKE ME FEEL"

"BAD"

Thumping and fraught, it feels like the soundtrack to a late-night walk through a bad neighborhood. It also successfully makes Jackson sound dangerous, which is no small feat. Amazingly, the video was also one of the earliest by a Black artist ever played on MTV.

"Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'" 1983

It's hard to write a better album opener than this one from *Thriller*, which not only kicks up the energy but lays out Jackson's ambitious musical agenda—from the disco beat to the rock timbre of the vocals to the closing refrain of "Mama-se, mama-sa, mama-coo-sa," cribbed from the song "Soul Makossa," a hit by the Cameroonian saxophonist Manu Dibango.

"We Are the World" 1985

Parts of this benefit single have aged poorly—specifically, the Quincy Jones fanfare that opens the thing and the Cyndi Lauper shrieking-dolphin interlude. But the song itself, written by Jackson and Lionel Richie, is a wonder, flexible enough to accommodate the vocal styles of everyone from Kenny Rogers to Bob Dylan. And at the 2:40 mark, when Jackson sings the bridge in a classic "'scuse me, genius coming through" moment, he proves that his style tops them all.

"P.Y.T. (Pretty Young Thing)" 1983

Another major hit from *Thriller*, "P.Y.T.," like "The Girl Is Mine," started with producer Quincy Jones, who got the idea when his then wife, Peggy Lipton (of *Mod Squad* fame) brought home lingerie with the words "pretty young thing" written on it. The song is fun, danceable, and has been covered and sampled by artists including Monica, Justin Guarini, and Kanye West.

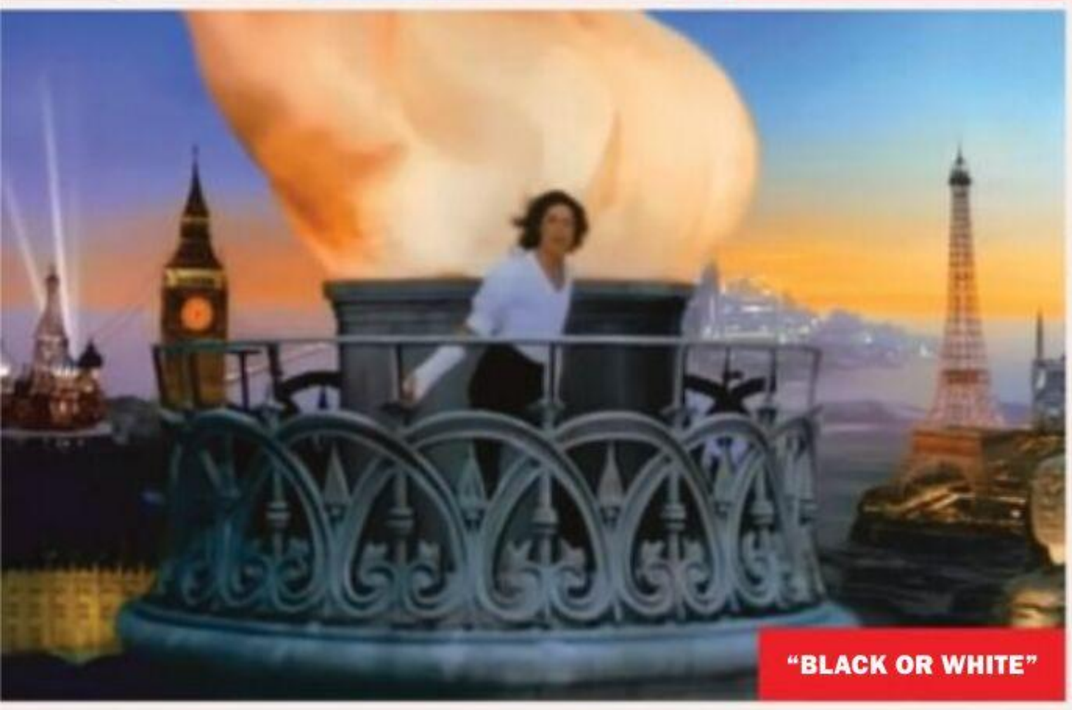
"Human Nature" 1983

This song was written by Toto keyboardist Steve Porcaro, who came up with the idea after his young daughter fell off a slide, was hit by a boy, and wanted to know why the boy would do such a thing. When Quincy Jones heard a demo of "Human Nature," he thought it was a perfect fit for *Thriller.*

"The Way You Make Me Feel" 1987

With its irresistible groove and flirty energy, "The Way You Make Me Feel" was supposedly written by Jackson to please his mother, Katherine (she wanted him to record an old-school shuffle), and was the third consecutive single from *Bad* to peak at No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100. Much of the song's appeal lies in its playfulness: "Jackson delivers certain phrases—'so goooood!'—in ways that no other human being ever has or ever will," wrote Stereogum.

"SMOOTH CRIMINAL"



"BLACK OR WHITE"

"REMEMBER THE TIME"

"Bad" 1987

The title track of *Bad* felt different from anything Jackson had recorded—an intentional choice made to move the singer away from his nice-guy image toward an edgier, more aggressive look and sound. The song was inspired by a tragic real-life event—the 1985 killing of Edmund Perry, a Black honors student, by a white NYPD police officer—and took on themes of escaping poverty, peer pressure, and societal expectations. "Bad" was a massive global success and established Jackson as the undisputed King of Pop.

"Man in the Mirror" 1988

Jackson's catalog is so deep that people tend to overlook this simple midtempo ballad from *Bad*. But beyond offering a fleeting glimpse of autobiography ("I'm starting with the man in the mirror/I'm asking him to change his ways"), it's one of Jackson's most powerful vocals and accessible social statements—not to mention the best-ever use of a gospel choir in a pop song.

"Smooth Criminal" 1988

"Smooth Criminal" could easily make it onto this list simply for Jackson's famous 45-degree anti-gravity lean in the song's nine-minute video. But there's also the iconic gangster imagery, white suit, fedora, and repeated question, "Annie, are you okay?" (inspired by Resusci Anne, the name of the doll used to teach CPR), which turned "Smooth Criminal" into a cultural phenomenon.

"Black or White" 1991

The first single from *Dangerous,* "Black or White," which encouraged racial unity, hit the number-one spot on the Billboard Hot 100 in just three weeks, the fastest climb since the Beatles' 1969 track "Get Back." Jackson's smash stayed in the position for seven weeks, in part propelled by its catchy fusion of pop-rock-rap, as well as a cutting-edge video that showed people's faces blending together. Undoubtedly, racial politics also played a role, with fans pointing to lyrics like "it don't matter if you're black or white" and debating why Jackson was lightening his skin.

"Remember the Time" 1992

The lyrics are about pining for an ex-lover, but what lands this song on this list is its zeitgeist-shaping, celeb-packed video. Set in ancient Egypt, the mini-movie was directed by John Singleton (*Boyz n the Hood*) and featured Jackson as a wizard trying to entertain the bored partner (played by Iman) of a king (played by Eddie Murphy). On guard as a sentry: Magic Johnson.

—JOSH TYRANGIEL AND EILEEN DASPIN

Peter Pan Speaks

In 1993, TIME covered Jackson's intervew with Oprah Winfrey, when the singer tried to rebut some of the rumors that swirled around him.

BY RICHARD CORLISS

AT 34, MICHAEL JACKSON is still the world's most fragile child star. When he was 11, the Cupid and Kewpie doll of the Jackson 5, he had three No. 1 hits. He did OK on his own too: the two best-selling albums in history (*Thriller* and *Bad*) and a contract with Sony Entertainment valued at a billion dollars. For most of the '80s, long before anyone felt compelled to dub him the King of Pop, he was that and more.

Yet, as he revealed in his 90-minute TV chat last week with talk-show empathizer Oprah Winfrey, Jackson remains a step removed from real life, a fact underscored by the name he calls his ranch outside Santa Barbara: Neverland, an allusion to his status as pop's Peter Pan. But Jackson may feel more kinship with another English outsider, John Merrick—that sweet-souled, tragically deformed creature called the Elephant Man. "I love the story," he told Winfrey. "It reminds me of me a lot. . . . It made me cry, because I saw myself in the story."

Jackson can cry out loud; that is his agony (displayed to Winfrey) and his art (in performance). These days, he is doing both: the world's most reclusive exhibitionist—or most exhibitionistic recluse—is everywhere. For the Clinton Inauguration, he led an all-star reunion of his 1985 "We Are the World" chorale. He spurred the Super Bowl to the largest U.S. TV audience ever, supervising a 98,000-person flash-card promotion for his Heal the World charity for inner-city children. He appeared at the NAACP Image Awards and the American Music Awards ceremonies.

Cynics can find a reason for this. He is no longer quite Michael Jackson. The *Thriller* album sold 21 million domestic copies (and 27 million more worldwide); *Dangerous,* his latest set, has trudged along at 4 million since its release in November 1991. In a *Los Angeles Times* survey of music moguls, Jackson ranked just 14th on the list of stars deemed worth signing to long- term contracts. Last year, according to *Forbes,* he made less money than Winfrey ($51 million to her $88 million).

Pop music is a fickle muse; anyone can lose the knack. But Jackson lost touch. Not as a performer—his falsetto and his footwork still dazzle—but with his audience. His career went stratospheric, and he went extraterrestrial. He seemed like one of the exotic animals he keeps in his backyard habitat. For some imaginary Madame Tussaud's, he transformed himself into his own waxed, blanched figure.

Last week, Jackson tried for mass-media redemption and went megaplatinum. Part grand Oprah, part soap Oprah, the Winfrey show was at the very least great TV: live, reckless, emotionally naked. For his first television interview in 14 years, Jackson won a huge audience—the largest, excluding Super Bowls, in

Michael Jackson Talks . . . to Oprah *was seen live by about 62 million Americans and 28 million more from around the globe. The program was filmed at Neverland Ranch (opposite).*

a decade—and a forum to counter some of the zanier rumors that have swirled around him. He rebutted the charge that he sleeps in a hyperbaric chamber; the photo suggesting he did actually showed him, he said, testing equipment at a burn center he founded after being "burned very badly" shooting a 1984 Pepsi spot.

He claimed he has had only minimal plastic surgery, referring viewers to his 1988 biography *Moonwalk*, in which he admitted to having had his nose removed—sorry, remodeled—and a chin cleft made. And he denied he bleached his skin to its current Kabuki whiteness as a renunciation of his ethnic roots: "I am proud to be a black American." He said (and his dermatologist has confirmed) he suffers from a "disorder that destroys the pigmentation of the skin. . . . It's in my family. . . . Using makeup evens it out, 'cause it makes blotches on the skin." The disease, vitiligo, is "more visible with those with black or brown skin," says Dr. Madhu Pathak, a professor of dermatology at Harvard. "There is treatment. Michael Jackson may die of other diseases, but not from this one. He will have a normal life."

That last prognosis is, alas, faulty; Jackson's life has never been normal. For a celebrity of his magnitude, to be seen is to be smothered, to be a star is to be a freak. His childhood story is as poignant for what he says he missed as it is pathetic for what he endured, including abuse by his father.

Responding to Winfrey's question "Did your father ever beat you?," Michael tried to smile as he said, "Yes." Then, in an aside to his father, "I'm sorry. Please don't be mad at me." With that wincing smile, Jackson was like a wounded orphan who has walked through fire and has booked a return trip. How strong is the bond, the bondage, of victim to victimizer? *Dangerous* is "dedicated to my dearest parents, Katherine and Joseph Jackson."

Asked if he was a virgin, he smiled and said he was "a gentleman. You can call me old-fashioned, if you want." He has dated Brooke Shields, but the actress says, with a smile in her voice, "He has not asked me to marry him. Maybe that's going to be on the next *Oprah* show." Shields, 27, also grew up naked before the camera and understands the slash and burn of early fame. "It is very hard," she says of Jackson, "when your family turns against you, and when anyone you befriend slaps you in the face."

"In a way," Shields says—meaning the best way—"Michael is not of this world." But as a child aching for love, even from those who can abuse his trust, he resembles most other people on earth. And in daring to do battle without the armor of guile, he is something else old-fashioned: a hero on an impossible quest for innocence.

The Sad End of an American Icon

While Jackson could still sell hundreds of thousands of concert tickets at the end of his life, he had been transformed by surgery, scandal, and financial woes.

BY RICHARD LACAYO

WHEN WAS IT, EXACTLY, THAT Michael Jackson completed the transition from merely eccentric to faintly creepy? It began as far back as the mid-1980s, not long after *Thriller* made him a star of the magnitude of Elvis Presley or the Beatles. At first, his rumored oddities seemed harmless. Trying to buy the bones of the Elephant Man? Idiosyncratic maybe, but not sinister. Sleeping in an oxygen chamber? Unusual, but hey, superstardom has its prerogatives.

By the '90s, however, a more complicated transformation of Jackson's image was under way. In the last few months of his life, he could still sell hundreds of thousands of tickets for the long series of London concerts that he hoped would mark the start of a big, lucrative comeback. But the very fact that a comeback was in order was a sign of how much the once flourishing career had been undercut by the peculiarities of the man. When he was still in his 20s, Jackson's attachment to childhood pursuits—the amusement park rides and Disney movies and ice cream carts—could still be borderline charming, the delayed preoccupations of a child star denied a real childhood. When the guy on the merry-go-round was 50, it started to look pathological. The wigs, the skin bleaches, the face masks and parasols, the plastic surgery more thorough than what you get in the witness-protection program, the suspicious dealings with young boys—in the final decade or so of his life, Jackson accomplished his last remarkable feat: He turned himself into such a spectacle, he almost made people forget the real phenomenon he was.

Maybe it began long ago. In *Moonwalk*, the memoir he published in 1988, Jackson told stories of physical abuse by his father, Joe, the man who whipped his boys on to stardom as the Jackson 5. As Jackson said in a later interview, "He practiced us up with a belt in his hand." Before long, Jackson had two well-established and irreconcilable personas. There was the eternal boy so sensitive that his voice in any love song could end up on the verge of sobs, and there was the raging adult with his yelps and war whoops and his dance moves full of spring-loaded aggression. Like Mike Tyson, he had a child's high-pitched voice and the pent-up furies of a man. The original version of the video for his song "Black or White" included a long pantomime of rage in which, for four minutes, he smashed up a car, grabbed his crotch, and carried out one

Arriving at the Santa Barbara County Courthouse during his 2005 trial on child molestation charges, Jackson gestured to fans.

of his angular, hip-jabbing dances in silence. He quickly thought better of it and had the segment cut—maybe because it said too much.

At the time, he was still indisputably a star, if an unusual one. Jackson's 1991 album, *Dangerous,* debuted at No. 1 with big pop anthems like "Heal the World" and jaunty, darting tracks like "Black or White," a song that led a lot of people to notice that over time Jackson's skin had been getting significantly lighter. Eventually he explained that he suffered from vitiligo, a pigment disorder. He claimed to be compensating with skin bleaches to turn himself a more uniform color.

But the real trouble started in 1993, when it emerged that Jackson was being investigated on suspicion of child molestation by Tom Sneddon, the district attorney of Santa Barbara County, California. Sneddon even ordered the police to photograph Jackson's genitals to see if they had the identifying marks of vitiligo that Jackson's accuser, age 13, claimed to have seen. But before Sneddon could bring criminal charges, the boy's father brought a civil suit against Jackson on behalf of his son. The investigation and lawsuit put all the question marks about Jackson on display—his over-the-top identification with children, his particular fascination with boy actors like Macaulay Culkin and Emmanuel Lewis, his habit of conducting sleepovers with "special friends," the absence of any known adult sexual relationship in his life, male or female. From the fastness of his Neverland ranch, Jackson issued to the public an anguished videotaped statement protesting his innocence. But he eventually settled the suit for a reported $20 million.

In September of the next year, prosecutors decided not to file criminal charges because the chief accuser was no longer willing to testify. Maybe it was just a coincidence, but by that time Jackson was married. In May, he had quietly wedded Lisa Marie Presley. The daughter of Elvis Presley, Lisa Marie was a sort of kindred spirit, somebody who had seen up close the lethal burdens of fame on a scale few could imagine. But the marriage lasted less than two years.

Through it all, Jackson kept recording, touring, and selling. He was no longer racking up the massive sales of his peak years in the '80s, but then, what mere mortal could? In June 1995, he released the double album *HIStory: Past, Present and Future—Book I*, a greatest hits collection. The following year, Jackson entered a second marriage, this time with Debbie Rowe—a nurse in the office of his

From left: With Lisa Marie Presley in 1994, and with Debbie Rowe in 1997. Opposite: Before closing arguments in his 2005 trial, Jackson went through security. He was acquitted of all charges.

dermatologist—who was already pregnant. A few months later, she gave birth to Prince Michael I, and a year after that, to Paris Michael Katherine. In 1999, she and Jackson divorced. Jackson got custody of both children. Rowe got a multimillion-dollar settlement.

There was another child to come, Prince Michael II, born in 2002 to a still unnamed surrogate mother. For all the strange circumstances in which they grew up, Jackson's children have impressed people who have met them. When the rock musician Lenny Kravitz got together with Jackson to record a track, Kravitz said, "His children were there. I grew up in an old-school West Indian family where respect was paramount. And these kids were just like that, full of respect but not robotic. They both drew pictures for me and signed them."

Jackson's next album, *Invincible,* released in 2001, was a relative flop, going double platinum in the U.S. but costing a reported $30 million to produce. By that time, the world was teeming with boy bands and girl singers whose every move and yelp were borrowed from Jackson, but the King of Pop couldn't deliver his own lines anymore. He had too much backstory, which made it impossible for his voice to remain plausible as the pure vessel of romantic need, devotion, or desire. He was inducted the same year into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame as a solo artist. He was still the man who had electrified the world with *Thriller,* but people were starting to wonder if the thrill was gone.

Still, there were times when the old habits of hard work and professionalism shone through. JC Chasez, a member of NSync who shared the stage with Jackson several times, remembers being backstage at a 9/11 benefit concert and listening in awe as Jackson rehearsed before his performance: "He was doing vocal drills for an hour before he went out—40 years old and the guy is warming up for an hour before every show. He wanted to give that audience the best he had."

Offstage, though, the stranger kind of performances just kept on coming. In 2003, Jackson appeared in a two-hour documentary with British journalist Martin Bashir. When Bashir asked him about taking boy visitors to Neverland for sleepovers, Jackson answered, "The most loving thing to do is to share your bed with someone, you

know?" At one point in Bashir's film, a 13-year-old cancer patient is seen holding hands with Jackson. Soon, that boy would be the accuser in a criminal case brought by the same district attorney who had investigated Jackson in 1993. This time, Sneddon persuaded a grand jury to bring a felony indictment against the singer for child molestation, conspiracy, and giving alcohol to a minor.

What followed, starting in February 2005, was a 14-week trial by jury and by media. Since cameras weren't allowed in the courtroom, E! Entertainment Television produced nightly staged reenactments of the previous day's testimony. The prosecution brought out porn magazines seized from Jackson's house and called the boy to testify that Jackson had plied him with wine—Jackson allegedly called it "Jesus juice"—before making his moves. But it also called to the stand a parade of witnesses who had to admit they had lied in other proceedings or sold their stories to the tabloids. And it had to contend with an 80-minute video—produced by the Jackson camp—in which the boy's mother went on about how grateful she was for the time her son had spent with him. The jury found Jackson innocent on all counts.

Nevertheless, the trial had been an ordeal for him. It also offered the world another painful look at his strange, sad isolation. "He didn't trust people," says Thomas Mesereau, Jackson's lead attorney in the case. "He felt he'd been let down so often. And he would sometimes isolate himself because he felt that anyone that went near him wanted something. There was a side of him that just wished he could be an ordinary person and walk down the street."

After the trial, Jackson never again lived at Neverland. With his children, he decamped for almost a year to Bahrain at the invitation of the ruler's son, Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, a friend of Jackson's brother Jermaine. He later sued Jackson in a British court, claiming the singer had reneged on a music contract and book deal. The suit was settled out of court just before Jackson would have had to testify.

By then, Jackson's personal fortune was in steep decline. He lost control of Neverland when he defaulted on a $24.5 million loan. At his molestation trial, a forensic accountant, John Duross O'Bryan, testified that in the early 2000s, Jackson each year spent up to $30 million more than he was earning. At the time of his death, he may have been as much as $500 million in debt.

Jackson stayed afloat by leveraging his two principal assets: Neverland and the Sony/ATV music catalog, with its 251 Beatles songs, among other treasures. In 2005, he borrowed $270 million from banks at interest rates that reached 20 percent. After Jackson fell behind on payments, he sold the debt to Fortress Investment Group, a New York City private-equity firm that threatened to call in the loan in December 2005 when Jackson seemed about to default. Sony came to the rescue, arranging for financing at just 6 percent in return for Jackson's agreement to give the company an option to buy half his stake in the Beatles catalog for about $250 million if he defaulted on those loans.

The trial was an ordeal for Jackson, though he was acquitted. It also offered the world another painful look at his strange, sad isolation.

But Jackson wasn't finished. In March 2009, he announced his comeback plan, a series of concerts at the O2 arena in London, backed by the concert promoter AEG Live, that were set to begin on July 13. When the initial demand for tickets was huge, he extended the run to 50 shows, which would have gone right into 2010. There was also the prospect of a years-long world tour that might bring in as much as $400 million. In the days just before he died, Jackson was in Los Angeles rehearsing for the London shows.

Even if he had succeeded in making it back to the top for a while, however, it would have always been difficult to imagine Jackson, the eternal child, in old age. It was hard not to picture him as ever more eccentric and secluded, like Howard Hughes, or like Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard*. The Michael Jackson we prefer to keep in our memories is the man-child at the height of his phenomenal powers, the one with the saw-toothed yelps and the jackhammer moves, the one who flung thunderbolts from the stage. That's the man the future, which has a way of putting uncomfortable questions to the side, will take to its heart. ●

With reporting by Laura Fitzpatrick, Barbara Kiviat, and Julie Rawe

This Is It *presented unadorned rehearsal footage artfully stitched together to re-create Jackson's crowd-pleasing hits. It grossed approximately $267 million worldwide.*

This Is It

Just months after Jackson's death, Columbia released a documentary about rehearsals for the star's planned comeback tour. Here, an excerpt of the review by TIME's film critic.

BY RICHARD CORLISS

REDEMPTION, NOT TO MENTION true resurrection, requires a personal appearance. And 125 days after Michael Jackson died at age 50, in July 2009, he rose from the dead, at least onscreen, with *Michael Jackson's This Is It*, a docu-musical record of the star's rehearsals for his planned comeback London concert series.

The movie, from director Kenny Ortega—who was also in charge of the concert preparations—stitches together three months' worth of rehearsal footage, presenting a concert film without the concert. It is a no-warts hagiography that still gets the audience closer to the real Michael Jackson than anything else in the man's avidly documented history. Wisely and decently ignoring the circumstances of the star's death, Ortega focuses on the re-creation of about a dozen Jackson standards for the concert. ("Beat It," "Billie Jean," "Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'," and "I'll Be There" are all here.)

This Is It is of a piece with old-time musicals, like Busby Berkeley's *42nd Street* and Broadway's *A Chorus Line*, with all the key elements: the big star (Jackson), the guiding impresario (Ortega), and the retinue of gifted singers and dancers. Just two differences between the old musicals and this one: Instead of the star breaking a leg, he dies after we see the fruit of his labors. And in *This Is It*, the emphasis is not on love affairs but on the energizing, exhausting business of making a spectacle spectacular.

Ortega and Jackson had some Berkeley-size production numbers in mind. A version of "Smooth Criminal" interpolates Michael into antique movie clips with Rita Hayworth, Humphrey Bogart, and Edward G. Robinson. "They Don't Care About Us" sends 1,100 CGI soldiers marching down a kind of Champs-Élysées whose Arc de Triomphe is bent into an M for Michael. But the coolest moments show Jackson unadorned and unplugged. He sings "Human Nature" almost a cappella, blending vocal virtuosity and a choirboy's clarity.

No question that the star, deeply in debt to Sony and other creditors, needed the money the concerts would generate. But his heroic effort suggests that this was no take-the-money-and-run greatest-hits scam. Jackson saw *This Is It* as a career retrospective that would reestablish the value of his music.

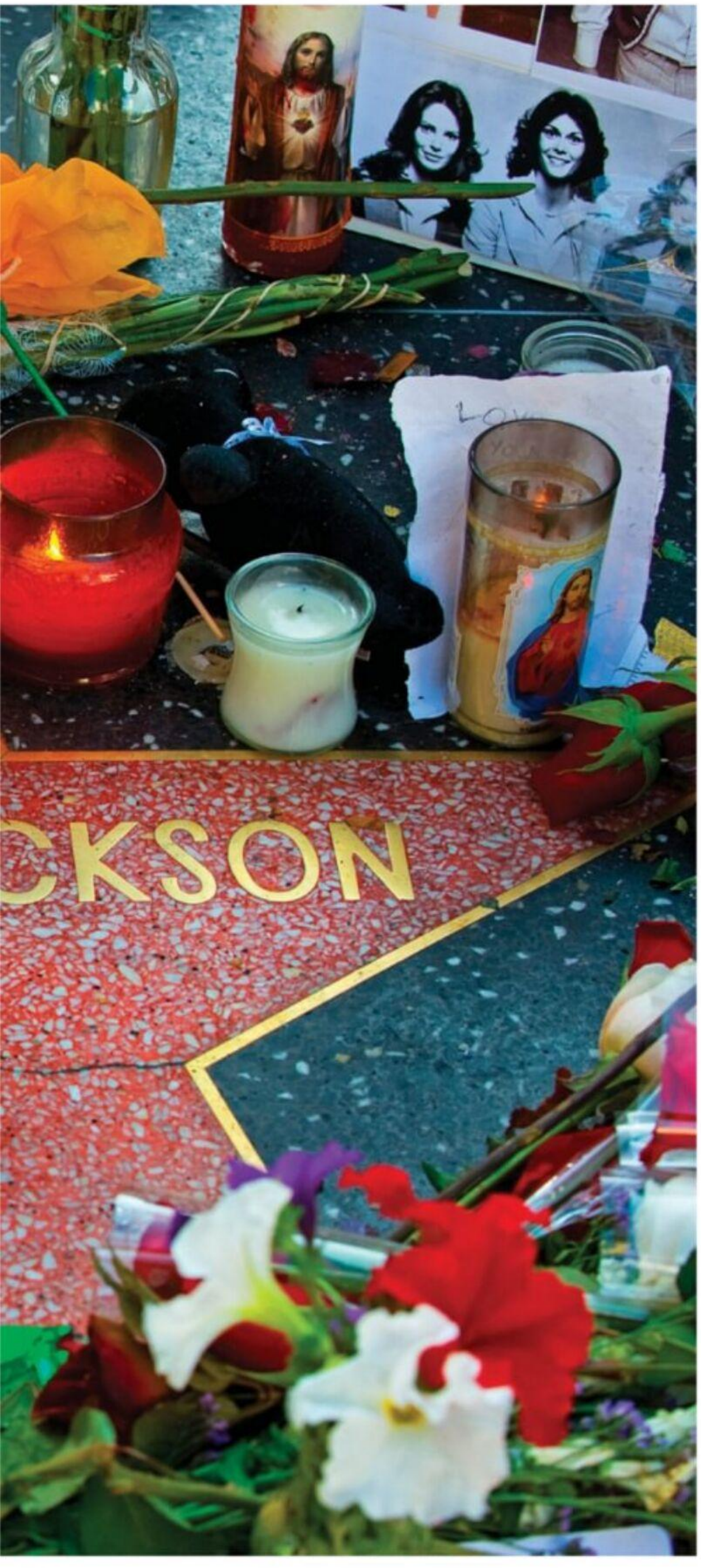
For a modern entertainer who dies before his time, immortality is measured in the money from commemorative projects like this. Michael Jackson will have no resurrection, but this movie earns him a redemptive legacy. It proves that, at the end, on stage, he was still a thriller. Fans and doubters alike can watch the gentle, driven singer-dancer and say: This is the Michael we want to remember.

Jackson performed "Dangerous" to celebrate American Bandstand's *50th birthday in 2002. He first appeared on the show at age 11.*

His Death and Legacy

On June 25, 2009, as word spread of Jackson's passing, shocked fans around the globe struggled to make sense of the news. Some still struggle today.

After Jackson's death, fans created a memorial to the star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, here on July 2, 2009.



Mourning a Brilliant but Troubling Idol

When news of Jackson's death broke, Google buckled under the weight of searches, and tweets related to the singer hit 5,000 per minute while crowds around the world gathered to pay tribute.

BY JOHN CLOUD

MICHAEL JACKSON KEPT HIS MOST stunning performance for the very end. Always able to command an audience, he knew how to bring whole arenas to fits of exultation with his moves and then silence them to the point of tears with his poetry. He was brilliant, excessive, maudlin, tacky, and possibly criminal, but you could never ignore him. So it was fitting that in death, he momentarily silenced the largest arena humanity has ever known: the internet.

News of this middle-aged man's sudden passing nearly broke it. Google's news section malfunctioned under the weight of "Michael Jackson" searches. The volume of Jackson-related tweets reached 5,000 per minute the day he died; the app was so overwhelmed that some users couldn't get

into their accounts. Wikipedia buckled temporarily after hundreds of edits were made to Jackson's page. More than 24,000 Jackson collectibles were offered for online auction or sale. Jackson was crowned the King of Pop back before new media helped crack the monolith of radio pop into innumerable subgenres, from hip-hop and house to praise rock and adult contemporary. But the old-media monarch showed, one last time, that he still reigned: The world stopped for him for a few hours on June 25, 2009.

And not just online. Huge crowds gathered in Hollywood, in Harlem, and near the home where he grew up in Gary, Indiana. Travelers passing through the Miami airport huddled around its TVs. There were street tributes from Paris to Karachi, Moscow to Mexico City. There was a candlelight vigil in Beijing. In Japan, the defense minister eulogized him.

The consummate performer, Jackson may well have suspected that his final exit would be a spectacle. The combination of sudden death and popcultural universality has triggered global mourning in the past: Elvis, Diana, JFK Jr. Jackson fit the pattern, almost eerily. The day after he died, one of his ex-wives, Lisa Marie Presley, wrote on her blog that Jackson once looked at her intently and said, referring to her father, "I am afraid that I am going to end up like him, the way he did." Elvis, a heavy prescription-drug user, died in August 1977 after crawling a few feet away from a toilet he had been sitting on. The coroner's report listed Elvis' cause of death as coronary arrhythmia. Jackson was rushed to the hospital after suffering cardiac arrest.

In the theater of celebrity tragedy, each play has three acts. The first is confusion. Why did it take hours for someone to find Elvis? Why wasn't Diana wearing a seat belt in a speeding car? What was JFK Jr. doing flying his own plane? For Jackson, the questions revolved around his health. If he was ill, why didn't anyone do something about his fragility? What we know is that someone at the Los Angeles mansion he was renting called 911 at 12:21 p.m. that day. "He's not breathing," the man said. "He's not responding to CPR, anything." He said a physician, identified in news reports as Dr. Conrad Murray, "has been the only one here." Murray seems to have tried hard to save Jackson—his voice is muffled but frantic in the background of the emergency call—but he kept to himself in the days after Jackson died. The police impounded the car Murray used—not because he was under suspicion, authorities said, but to check for medications that might have played a role in Jackson's death.

Accounts differ on the state of Jackson's health in the days, weeks, and even years before he died. At least since his 2005 trial on child molestation charges—charges he beat—reporters and other observers had noted his frail appearance and slow, almost pained carriage. Some people suspected substance abuse; one British journalist reported that Jackson had a genetic disorder that weakens the lungs.

Conrad Murray, flanked by lawyers during his 2011 manslaughter trial, was found guilty. Opposite: Jackson in 2009.

Jackson's camp had long denied that he had any serious health problems, and as the star rehearsed for 50 sold-out London concerts that were to begin July 13, 2009, he seemed to be himself again. Grammy Awards executive producer Ken Ehrlich, who attended a June 24 rehearsal, told *People* that Jackson had "great energy." He said the singer wasn't "giving it full out, but . . . I thought he was in great form."

There was talk, however, that

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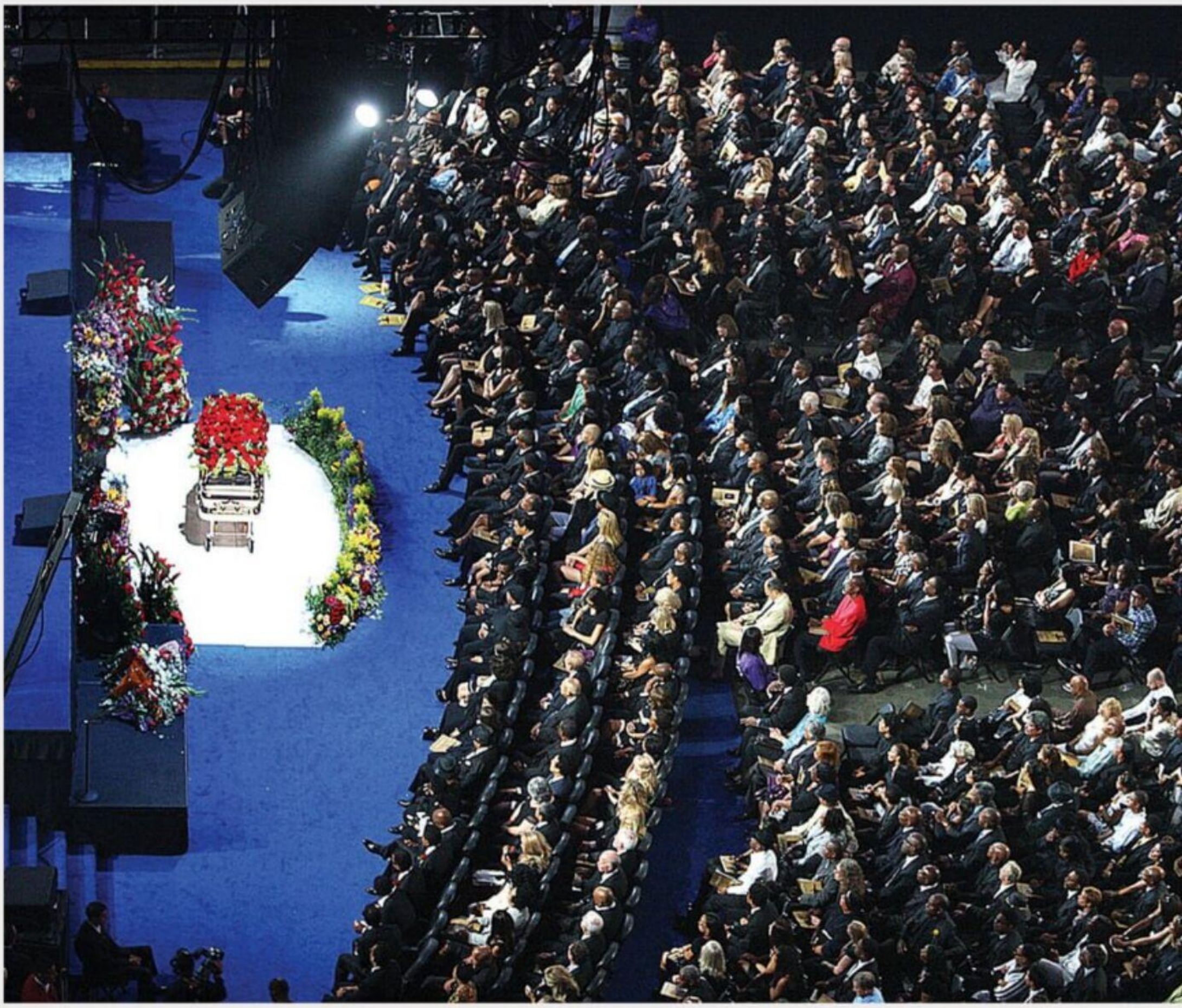


A Spectacular Goodbye

Jackson's memorial service at the Staples Center in Los Angeles was watched by 31 million people around the world.

BY JAMES PONIEWOZIK

THE MOST STRIKING STATEMENT at Michael Jackson's memorial service was not his daughter Paris's wrenching goodbye. It was not Berry Gordy declaring Jackson "the greatest entertainer that ever lived," nor was it the Rev. Al Sharpton's assertion that Jackson's fame made a generation of white kids comfortable with electing a Black President. It came before the encomiums and music began, after Motown singer Smokey Robinson took the stage, read testimonials from Diana Ross and Nelson Mandela, walked off—

And there was silence.

The networks hesitated to step on the quiet with commentary. So for a minute or so, we witnessed

About 200 people attended the private funeral at Forest Lawn cemetery (left). Lionel Richie and Mariah Carey performed at the public memorial. Above: The Jackson family at Forest Lawn.

a TV rarity: an utter hush. Broadcast and cable news alike took a breath—for the first time, it seemed, in a week and a half—and let the darkened arena and the stilled crowd tell the story. It was an unintended tribute and a blessed relief.

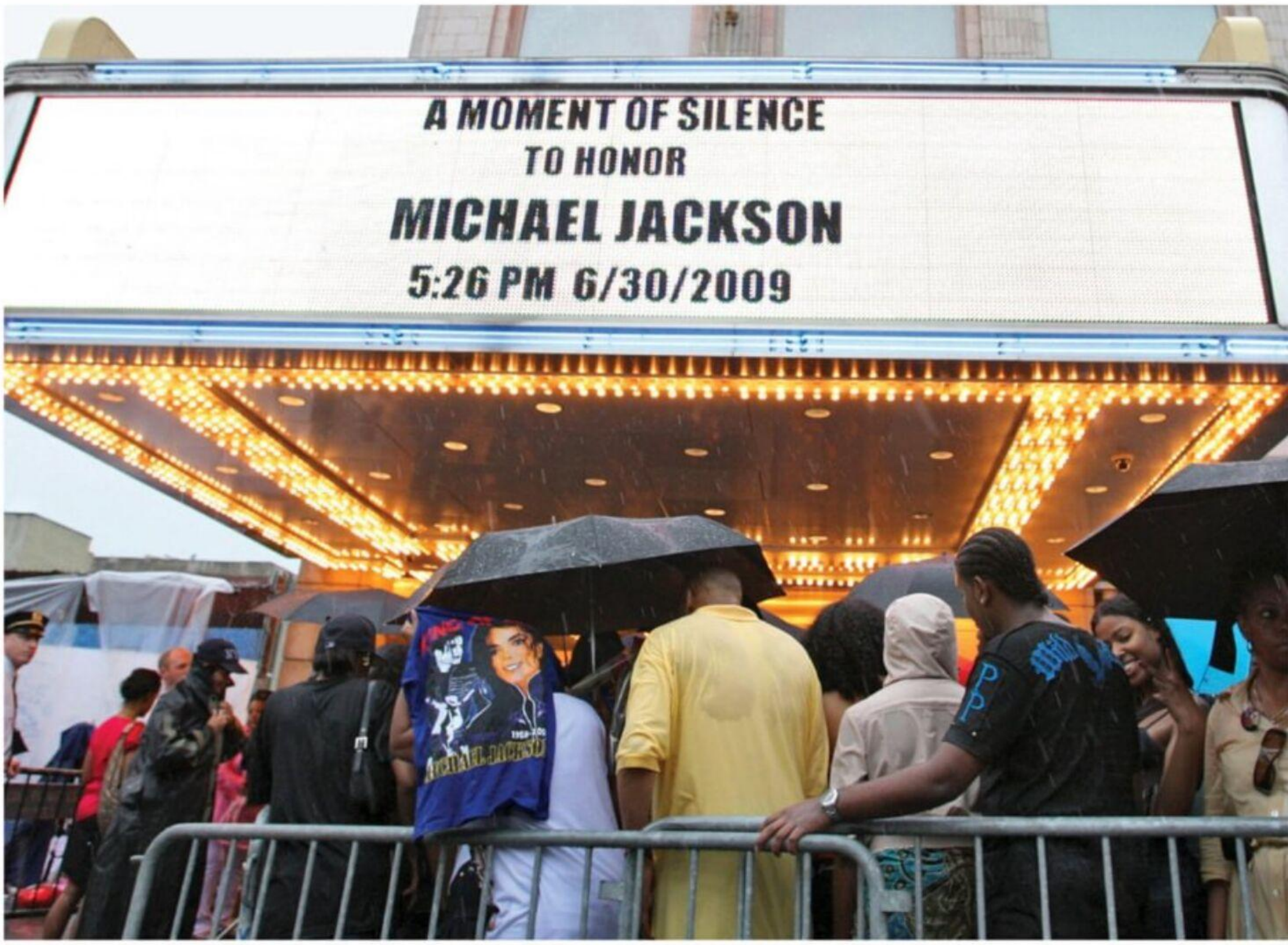
It says something about our culture that it took a mammoth event in a sports arena to demonstrate the power of a moment of quiet. Jackson's memorial was an outsize spectacle befitting an entertainer who engaged the world through outsize spectacles. The performers and eulogizers were A-list, the music anthemic, the casket gold-plated. And yet the service was also cathartic and tasteful, especially compared with the media frenzy that preceded it.

Indeed, between the memories and goodbyes, much of the memorial was about the media. A clip reel displayed tabloid headlines, and several speakers portrayed the singer as the victim of sensationalism. "Maybe now, Michael, they will leave you alone," his brother Marlon said. "Wasn't nothing strange about your daddy," Sharpton told Jackson's children. "It was strange what your daddy had to deal with."

People can debate whether that's true, whether Jackson was a victim, whether the media persecuted him during his child-molestation trials and other scandals or soft-pedaled his history after his death. But certainly in death, Jackson served the media the way he did in life: as a limitless draw for audiences.

The news is a poor vehicle for catharsis; it thrives on maintaining tension, not relieving it. And a memorial is a poor medium for an objective assessment. But in a perfect world, the memorial service would provide the media with an end point, a reason to pause and move on.

At this time, though, it doesn't look like that has happened. The showman is gone, but the show—as his life proved, for better and worse—goes on.



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Jackson was taking painkillers to recover from the grueling pre-London sessions. For years, Jackson seems to have swallowed a variety of pills ad libitum. "I do not want to point fingers at anyone because I want to hear what the toxicology report says and the coroner says," former Jackson attorney Brian Oxman told CBS. "But the plain fact of the matter is that Michael Jackson had prescription drugs at his disposal at all times." People.com quoted a source close to the family as saying the pills included not just painkillers but also antianxiety meds like Xanax and Valium.

Even more troubling, a Jackson family member told TMZ.com that Michael had been receiving daily injections of Demerol, an addictive painkiller. In high enough doses, Demerol can slow respiration to the point of suffocation, which can deprive the heart of oxygen and lead to sudden death, according to Dr. Douglas Zipes, a past president of the American College of Cardiology. Jackson was fascinated with Demerol. On his 1997 track "Morphine" —an unusually discordant Jackson song—he sings, "Close your eyes and drift away Demerol … Today he's taking twice as much Demerol." The day after Jackson died, Deepak Chopra told CNN that one night when the singer stayed at his house, he asked if Chopra had any of the drug. Chopra told TIME that Jackson was "totally enabled by these Hollywood Mafia drug-dealer doctors who have medical licenses and should be brought to justice. … Instead of managing his stress, they would give him drugs."

And yet the cause of death could be something much more straightforward. After all, Jackson was a man who, as the singer Patti Austin told CNN, rarely ate right and didn't usually work out—he just worked. He may simply have had a heart

Fans lined up at Harlem's Apollo Theater, where Jackson first performed at age 9. Shemar Williams, age 8, moonwalking.

attack. "When you live like a hummingbird," Austin said, "you don't have a long lifespan."

The second act of a celebrity tragedy is cleaner, simpler than the confusing first act. Everyone suddenly begins to heap encomiums on the dead. After Princess Diana was killed in a car crash in 1997, strangers hugged one another in the streets of London. Celebrities around the globe who had known her sent heartbroken tributes.

And so it was with Jackson. Brooke Shields called him an "extraordinary friend, artist and contributor to the world." Elizabeth Taylor said she and Jackson shared "the purest, most giving love I've ever known." On MTV, music writer Kurt Loder said Jackson's genius reached beyond singing and dancing. Jackson, he said, had been able to negotiate complex business deals with Sony in his spare time. In the days after Jackson's death, music critics stumbled over one another to praise him for the way he had blended Black music and white, as well as for the rigor of his stage performances.

Jackson longed to please people and worked hard at it all his life: He tried to satisfy his demanding and abusive father, his insatiable fans, his own bottomless ambitions. All those long rehearsals for his London comeback were typical. After all, this was a man who literally burned in service to pop culture—his hair famously caught fire as he filmed a Pepsi commercial in 1984—and who routinely performed through injuries. Yet for so public a figure, Jackson was socially awkward, inept at small talk, and terrified when the distant audience became an adoring mob. Donald Trump told TIME that Jackson used to drop to his knees to crawl away from maniacal fans after concerts. "I guess the stress, the anticipation and the passion he was emitting,

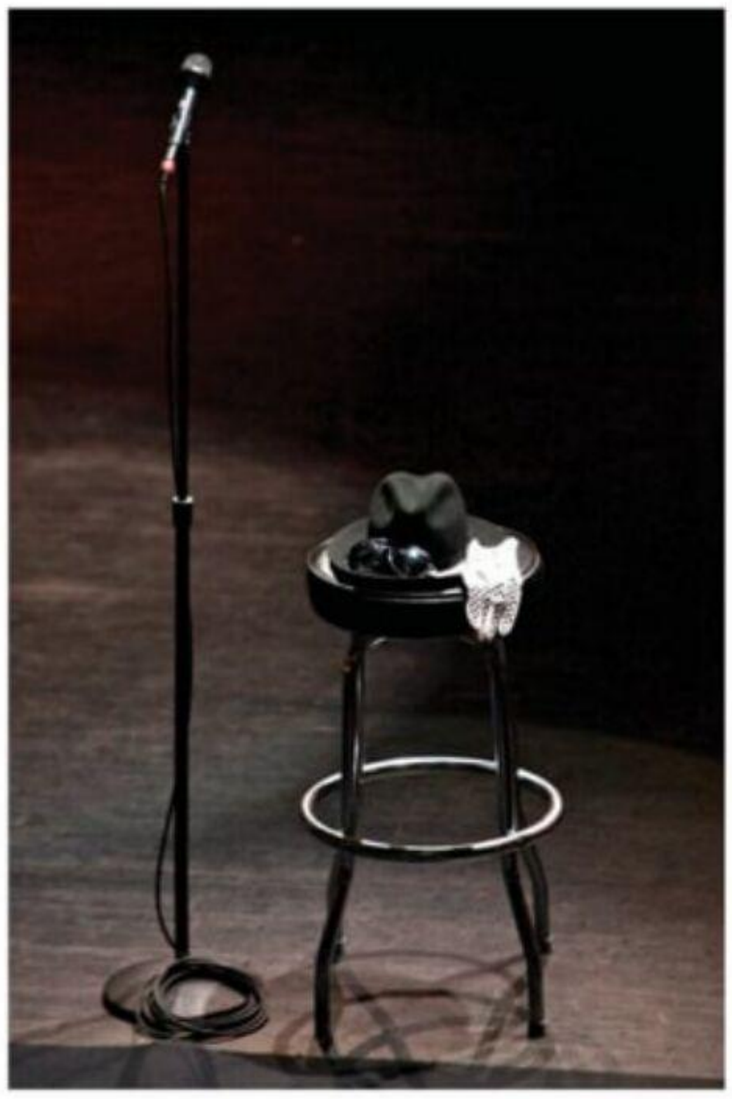
wanting to do this comeback so badly, maybe that got to him," Jackson's friend Uri Geller, an illusionist, told the Press Association.

The second act reached its apogee when the Rev. Al Sharpton appeared in front of New York City's Apollo Theater, where Jackson had performed as a child and where traffic slowed to a crawl the day he died, to place him in a highly flattering historical context: "Way before Tiger Woods, way before Oprah Winfrey, way before Barack Obama, Michael did with music what they later did in sports and in politics and in television."

Probably true. Yet as we all witnessed while Jackson's career played out, the star was never comfortable in his own skin. Even as Sharpton spoke, Facebook and other sites were host to raucous debates about whether the instant hagiography wasn't minimizing too many troubling details. Jackson had lived as a man frozen in puberty—his voice a weird falsetto, his hand continually grabbing his crotch, his clothes sometimes stitched with faux military regalia of the sort that should interest only a boy. For a while, a constant companion was a chimp called Bubbles. When he died, Jackson was heavily in debt, a man beset by financial and legal predicaments caused largely by his inability to control his enthusiasms for expensive baubles and inviting little boys into his bedroom. He paid a reported $20 million to settle one case brought by an alleged sexual-abuse victim.

The third and final act takes longer: We set emotion aside and let investigators do their work. The thousands of flowers left outside the Manhattan apartment building where John F. Kennedy Jr. resided had long withered when the final reports on his plane crash were issued. So it will be with Jackson. Now we wait for the blank parts of the day he died to be filled in.

By the time of his death, Jackson had—like many wealthy people—accumulated many "friends" who turned out to be knaves or useless hangers-on. (On her blog, Presley called them "the awful vampires and leeches he would always manage to magnetize.") One associate has been portrayed in the press as a physician, but it's unclear whether he has a medical license. Jackson was often sued by employees who may have been looking for a quick buck. His death may well be accidental, but investigators and journalists will spend months determining whether it could have been prevented if those around him weren't so often using him as an ATM.



Some of Jackson's famous accessories were displayed on stage at the Apollo Theater tribute on June 30, 2009.

Although his family has other issues to attend to—custody of Jackson's three kids, as well as the ruins of his empire—it will doubtless ensure a thorough inquiry. L.A. authorities autopsied the body on June 26, but the coroner won't release a final report for weeks. In the meantime, those accused in the media of abetting Jackson's decline will surely highlight the star's appetites. After all, they might point out, this is a guy who settled in 2007 with a Beverly Hills pharmacy that claimed he owed an astonishing $100,000 for prescriptions it had filled.

On the day he died, many who knew Jackson described him as "gentle," which seemed to be a kind of code, an explanation, an excuse. In fact, he seemed more like a character in a show he had no control over, a boy turned into a man too soon, and a man who tried to become a boy all over again. His greatest performance may have occurred June 25, when sudden death ensured that we will always wonder who he really was.

Reported by Barbara Kiviat, Tim Morrison, Alice Park and Andrea Sachs/New York and Alison Stateman/Los Angeles

Paris Jackson was surrounded by family as she spoke. "Wasn't nothing strange about your daddy," Rev. Al Sharpton told her and her siblings. "It was strange what your daddy had to deal with."

Paris Jackson's Heartfelt Farewell

The 11-year-old, speaking at the Staples Center memorial service, choked up the audience when she called Jackson "the best father you could ever imagine."

BY BRYAN ALEXANDER

MARIAH CAREY'S VOICE CRACKED in emotion during "I'll Be There." Brooke Shields broke down recalling Michael Jackson as the Little Prince. Even Usher took off his sunglasses, revealing how pained he was by the sight of Jackson's brilliant gold casket on the floor of the Staples Center.

But the most indelible moment in the 2½-hour memorial ceremony was Jackson's only daughter, Paris, on the podium. The 11-year-old unexpectedly took the microphone and spoke to a worldwide audience, bidding her father farewell. "I just wanted to say, ever since I was born, Daddy has been the best father you could ever imagine," she said. "And I just wanted to say I love him so much."

With that, the sobbing girl fell into the arms of her aunt Janet Jackson. Many of the 21,000 audience members audibly choked back tears. Some wept. "It broke me down," said Cynthia Moutin, 43, from Fremont, Califorinia. "When she called him 'Daddy'—that was the last straw."

Michael's three children, who sat just feet away from his casket, have been the subject of intense curiosity and mystery throughout their short lives. The sons and daughter of the world's most intriguing and often bizarre performer, even their exact origins are a mystery. Before today, they have almost always worn masks or veils on the rare occasions they have been photographed.

But to the surprise of the memorial organizers, the children took front-row seats at an event broadcast live on every major network, as well as around the world. And Paris's words made it abundantly clear that Jackson—a controversial subject in life and in death—was also someone's beloved father.

While the stage cameras kept away from the children, most eyes were fixed on the three in the front row next to their grandparents Katherine and Joe Jackson. Seven-year-old Prince Michael II, known as Blanket, held a Michael Jackson doll. Eldest son Michael Joseph Jr., 12, held the memorial program and chewed gum vigorously. Paris kept close to her grandmother.

"Looking at the front row and looking into the rafters and seeing the fans, I felt like we got a little closure today," longtime Jackson collaborator Kenny Ortega told TIME. "We remembered our boy."

After *Leaving Neverland*, What Do We Do with Michael Jackson?

In 2019, TIME discussed the documentary in which two grown men accused the singer of having molested them as children. Fans were challenged to reconcile the allegations with Jackson's genius.

BY STEPHANIE ZACHAREK

BARELY A WEEK GOES BY WHEN WE'RE not forced to wrestle with the damaging, and sometimes horrific, acts of men who have made art that we care about. We need to put the well-being of humans above movies and paintings, above words and music. Yet movies and paintings, and words and music, are the very things that allow us to make sense out of human nature. What do we toss out and what do we keep, especially if we're dealing with works we've loved most of our lives, made by people whose goodness we used to believe in?

It was, at one time, easy enough to believe in the inherent goodness of Michael Jackson, and it has always been easy to love his music. But now, both of those things are harder. *Leaving Neverland,* Dan Reed's revelatory and unsettling HBO documentary, focuses on two men who claim, with absolute believability, that as kids they suffered sexual abuse at the hands of Michael Jackson. James Safechuck met Jackson in 1987 when, at age 10, he appeared with the singer in a Pepsi commercial; Wade Robson was a precocious 7-year-old aspiring performer in Brisbane, Australia, who idolized Jackson before meeting him backstage after a concert. Both men speak with raw frankness about how Jackson seduced them, coaxing them into sexual intimacy that began, at least in their eyes as children, as innocent friendship. This adds context to why both boys remained loyal to Jackson, having previously made statements that they had not been abused by him. The movie is unnervingly illuminating, as a new lens pulls focus on things we may have already known, deep down, about Jackson but still don't really want to admit. (His estate has repeatedly refuted the allegations made in the film: "*Leaving Neverland* isn't a documentary, it is the kind of tabloid character assassination Michael Jackson endured in life, and now in death," they said in a January statement.)

Leaving Neverland premiered at Sundance in January, and in the month or so since, it has been a topic of conversation among people who have seen it and those who haven't. But the buzz, curiously, doesn't consist overwhelmingly of the sound of knives being sharpened. While I've heard vague and certainly reasonable mutterings of "I'm not sure I can enjoy Michael Jackson's music anymore," I haven't heard, either in real life or on social media, any loud declarations about the need to erase him from the culture. I'm sure those people are out there. But why does it seem that we still feel sympathy for Michael

Jackson leaving the Santa Barbara County Courthouse on May 12, 2005.

Jackson—creepy weirdo Michael Jackson, who, it now seems abundantly clear, abused children, for god's sake—in a way that we can't for, say, Louis C.K. or Charlie Rose? And why does it seem that we feel more for him than we might feel for R. Kelly, whose alleged crimes also involved children?

The seriousness of what Jackson allegedly did to Safechuck and Robson, and possibly more kids like them, isn't in question: Hurting a child is something no decent person can defend. But we don't think of Jackson as having malice in his soul; he seemed, more than anything, lost. As a kid, he was like a little grown-up. As a grown-up, he was like a child. Somehow, Jackson demands a different framework of judgment from the R. Kellys of the world, people who seem cruel and selfish in a way he was not. It's as if we see Jackson as a rare and fragile bird, deserving of our compassion despite the evils he may have committed. Part of this may be that he is no longer living—it is harder to cancel a memory than a human being. But we're still left with the question of how to feel about the music he left behind, music made first by a boy and later by a troubled man.

Leaving Neverland focuses squarely on the experience of Jackson's alleged victims, and its view of Jackson—of his actions and his later efforts to hide them—is suitably damning. Reed doesn't make excuses for Jackson, and Jackson's accusers don't either. That Safechuck and Robson survived their experience with Jackson doesn't absolve him of the harm they say he did, to them or to others. But they acknowledge the complexity of what happened to them, and their stories, both in their similarities and their intimate differences, underscore just how complicated and heartbreaking the bigger narrative is.

A further complication is that you and I, as average humans susceptible to the charms of great pop music, are dealing with not one but two Michael Jacksons, depending on how old you were—and how old he was—when you discovered him. Those of us who grew up alongside him—people over 50, R&B fans specifically—came to love him when he was an actual child and not just childlike. But in the 1980s, as a grown man, he drew a new group of younger fans; it now seems he took advantage of some of that adoration and betrayed the trust of that later fan base. The earlier fan base has to reckon with something else: How did that kid—that vital, radiant kid—come to this?

No matter what Jackson did, he belongs to us forever, for better or worse. He belongs to us because he was practically given to us, right at the moment when Joe Jackson, patriarch, manager, and possible monster, saw that Lo! The seventh of his 11 children was filled with gold. Michael Jackson spoke of abuse at the hands of his father; he also said repeatedly that he forgave him. Certainly, in the early days, the elder Jackson was eager to make money off his brood, particularly Michael. When did he start seeing dollar signs? It may have been the instant the Jackson 5 scored their first minor local hit, "Big Boy," in 1968. Or it may have been the next year, when the group's first Motown single, "I Want You Back," hit No. 1. Who knows? But very early on, Joe handed Michael over, saying, "He's yours now; make all checks payable to me."

Leaving Neverland focuses on the experience of Jackson's alleged victims, and its view of Jackson is damning.

And we took him, happily, not knowing or even caring what the cost would be to him. Because the young Michael was magnificent! His voice was assured and evocative; he poured joy into his singing, and as we listened, even more joy rushed out, magnified a thousandfold. His dance moves were dazzling—not just adorable but bracingly modern.

Miraculously, Jackson didn't outgrow his gifts; he grew into them. I remember, as a teenager, dancing almost all the way through *Off the Wall* and thinking, How could a guy who'd been around so long make a record this good? I loved most of *Thriller,* but by that time, a new, younger audience had adopted Jackson. I remember, around the time of 1987's *Bad*, seeing how much kids loved him—as much as I had loved him when I was a kid—and wondering, How? Why now, when he looks like this, his nose shaved away by plastic surgery into a shadow of its former beauty? Why now, when he's acting outright strange? Still, I understood the appeal, and our generation handed him to the next group of kids, not fully knowing what a mess he was.

Yet even by the time of *Thriller,* he was already a mess, a visibly delicate, wounded soul. His bizarre-

In Leaving Neverland, *Wade Robson (left) and James Safechuck spoke about how Jackson allegedly abused them. They are seeking $400 million in damages in a trial scheduled for November 2026.*

ness and his loneliness only intensified as he got older. In search of some ideal of beauty that made sense only to him, he had done so much to his face that he no longer looked like himself, whatever "himself" had ever been. Despite his guardedness, you could almost see right through him, as if, in sanding his features away, he had unintentionally made himself transparent.

What are you supposed to do with a person like that? Stop loving him, right when he needs love the most? The Jackson story only got darker: There were the accusations of sexual abuse in 1993 (a case that was settled out of court) and again in 2003 (a case that, famously, went to trial; Jackson was acquitted). There were two marriages, including one to the daughter of Elvis. With his second wife, Jackson had two children; another, named Blanket, was born to a surrogate. And finally, in 2009, there was the weird and incontrovertibly sad death, amid reports that one of the many drugs Jackson availed himself of was propofol, intended for use as an anesthetic before surgery. (Jackson's personal physician, Conrad Murray, was eventually convicted of involuntary manslaughter for administering propofol the night of Jackson's death.) In life, there could be no rest for the King of Pop, only induced sleep.

It's all sad, and none of it is an excuse. *Leaving Neverland* changes the context of Michael Jackson. If you pay attention to it, it can't help changing the way you view him.

It's sorrowfully prophetic to listen to "Big Boy" now, particularly the plaintively simple lyric "I'm a big boy now/That's looking for someone to love, oh yeah/Someone, someone to share my dreams." That's a child's view of what love must be like, and how could Jackson, at the time, sing as anything but a child? Yet what's more striking is the yearning in his voice, shimmering and unformed, speaking of a desire to get real life started—to grow up, to find someone to love, to do whatever it is grown-ups in love do. "Hurry up and get here, adult love and romance!" is the invocation that Jackson, as a kid, sang over and over again. And then, when adulthood came, he wanted childhood back. He went about reclaiming it in all the wrong ways, in harmful ways.

But we know where his childhood went, because without even thinking, we breathed it in. Maybe we owe him a strange and corrupted gratitude for all he gave us, especially now that we see how he didn't understand he needed to keep something back for himself. And perhaps we can spare some sorrow for a man who, in his muddled brain, allegedly harmed children. Jackson's is one of the most complex types of tragedy, one that demands we hold the suffering of those he harmed as close as we hold the joy he brought us. It's a tricky, near-impossible embrace.

That's another reason we have movies and paintings, words and music: They're something to cling to when humans fail us.

At Neverland Ranch in 2001.

Reconsidering Michael Jackson

The King of Pop's biopic forces a reckoning with genius, allegations, and the limits of absolution.

BY STEVEN GRAY

THE ARRIVAL OF THE BIOPIC *MICHAEL* is reopening a question that never stays buried: What do we do with a genius whose story is shadowed by allegations of harm?

A big-budget studio film doesn't simply revisit a public figure—it situates him in our cultural memory, smoothing some edges, flattening others, and elevating or puncturing myths. That makes the movie, and the arguments that will inevitably follow, a celebration and test of our selective attention: what we preserve, what we minimize, what we cannot bear to hold alongside the undeniably brilliant music. With Jackson, the realities collide: The awe is real. So is the enduring discomfort raised by the alleged child sex abuse—resurfaced forcefully by *Leaving Neverland*—and the fact that no retelling can offer a clean, perfect ending.

THE CULTURAL SHOCK OF *LEAVING NEVERLAND*

Michael Jackson's career soared through the 1980s with a velocity matched only by his startling physical transformation. The first pause came with allegations that he'd sexually abused a boy. Jackson denied the claims, reached a settlement with the 13-year-old's family, and entered a period of relative domesticity. He married and divorced, had three children. Our skepticism lingered, and by the turn of the millennium, the King of Pop's stardom had shifted from dominion to drift. More allegations followed. And in 2009, he died.

In many ways, our memory of Jackson operates on two distinct tracks. On one, there's a sprawling business empire fueled by Jackson's talent and the public's embrace of it: Las Vegas, Broadway, West End, and global musical tours. On the other track sit the persistent allegations.

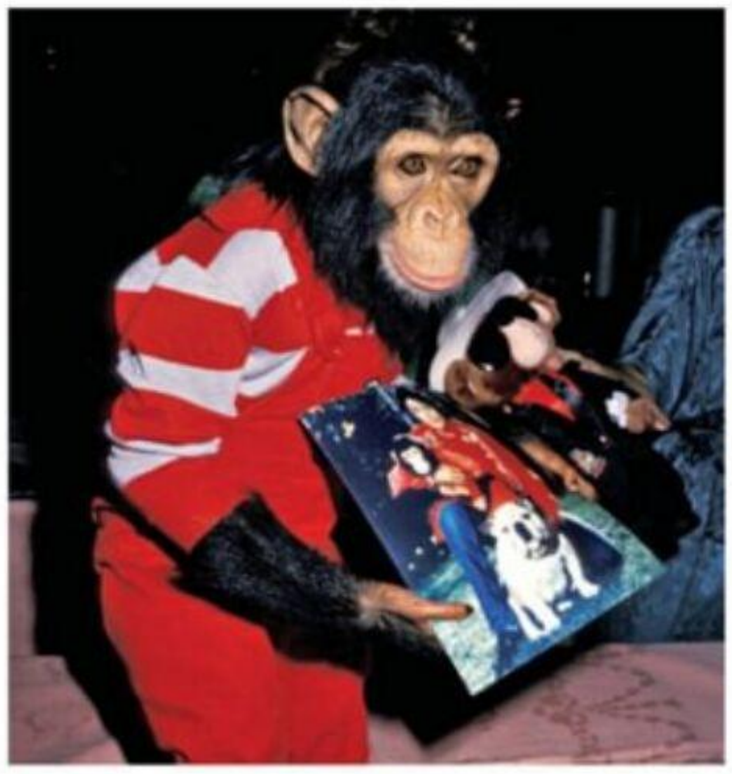
The arguably most destabilizing chapter of the second track arrived in 2019, with *Leaving Neverland,* HBO's two-part documentary. In it, James Safechuck and Wade Robson—men now, looking back on their boyhoods—described what they said were years of sexual abuse by Jackson. They recalled, in explicit detail, the intimacy that unfolded within the Jackson orbit, an environment shaped by the intoxication of being chosen from relative obscurity.

Both of the accusers had previously defended Jackson in court cases, insisting he hadn't abused them. Then, after Jackson's death, they reversed course and pursued legal claims against Jackson's estate. In 2013, Robson told NBC's Matt Lauer, "I

never forgot one moment of what Michael did to me. But I was psychologically and emotionally unable and unwilling to understand that it was sexual abuse." He was referring to experiences he alleged occurred between ages 7 and 14.

There's a grim plausibility here that doesn't necessarily need certainty, only the willingness to sit with honesty. People can—and do—survive trauma without naming what happened to them. Trauma can be compartmentalized and rationalized, sometimes for years, until something breaks the seal: a triggering memory, the arrival of a new child. It's possible that, especially at a young age, you may not have the language or context to pinpoint that what you've experienced is, in fact, abuse.

Leaving Neverland premiered at Sundance in late January 2019, landing in the midst of the #MeToo moment, when Americans were being rewired to more deeply scrutinize power. The response was swift. Oprah aired a special interview, called *After Neverland,* with Safechuck and Robson. Broadcasters in New Zealand and Canada pulled Jackson's songs from playlists. *The Simpsons* removed an episode that featured him. The documentary became its own legal battleground. Jackson's estate sued HBO for a reported $100 million. Robson and Safechuck continued their civil claims; a trial is expected for late 2026. (Jackson's family has dismissed the suits as a money grab.)



By the end of 2019, the news of the *Michael* biopic was confirmed, with Jackson's estate heavily involved in the production. There was always going to be a Jackson biopic at some point—there's too much money and myth at stake for Hollywood to resist. But the timing, and the degree of the estate's involvement, reads differently depending on where you stand. Is it all a bid to reclaim and sanitize Jackson's narrative so the fortune continues flowing? Or is it a good-faith attempt to set the story straight—even if the culture is too diffused to agree on what a "straight" telling of Michael Jackson's story means? There's no easy answer, even from the Jackson family. Jackson's nephew Jaafar will portray the King of Pop. The star's daughter, Paris Jackson, wasn't involved in the production, and said, according to *Deadline*, "The thing about these biopics is—it's Hollywood. So it's fantasy land.... The narrative is being controlled, and there's a lot of inaccuracy."

NEVERLAND, THE REFUGE—AND THE WARNING

Jackson created Neverland Ranch as a sanctuary, nestled in the grassy valleys northwest of Los Angeles, far away from the paparazzi's gaze. It was a sunny place the performer could explore himself, and sometimes he invited kids to experience the magic of a childhood he lost. But at some point—between the carousel, the ferris wheel, and Bubbles the chimpanzee sleeping in his bedroom—Jackson rode Neverland's roller coaster far away from the bounds of reality and social norms, into fantasy.

One of the most vivid moments in Jackson's public unraveling came during his 2003 interview with Ed Bradley on *60 Minutes,* as yet another wave of allegations arrived. Jackson was clearly in damage control mode, yet he insisted it was perfectly acceptable for an adult man to share a bed with children who weren't his own. "If you're going to be a pedophile or Jack the Ripper, if you're going to be a murderer, it's not a good idea. That, I'm not," he said with certainty. Moments later, he sought refuge in his chart positions. "My album is No. 1 all over the world. America is the only one...I don't want to say too much." He paused, sensing the precipice beneath him. "It's a conspiracy."

Jackson seemed on the edge of acknowledging what he believed to be the accusations' root: not just his accusers' financial motivations or his own view of behavioral norms, but racism—the way America compresses Black men into archetypes, no matter how singular their gifts. He'd lived so long above gravity, insulated by fans and fantasy, that he appeared to forget the peculiar rules Black people in America carry. The rules say that eccentricity is

Jackson paid $17 million for a 2,700-acre ranch outside Santa Barbara and named it Neverland; he built an amusement park there, as well as a zoo. Opposite: Bubbles, Jackson's pet chimp.

rarely acceptable. You may only step so far out of line before being humbled back to earth. Nothing can spare you: not a physical transformation, not wealth, not Ivy League degrees or a suit.

There was something mournful in watching Jackson grapple, almost in delusion, with the realization that his fame or talent couldn't save him from the reckoning, or the boundaries of adult behavior with children.

It's worth asking how much of our interpretation of Jackson is a failure of our cultural vocabulary. In the 1980s and 1990s, a man who moved with so much softness, who treated appearance as a canvas and refused the cues of conventional masculinity, was rarely granted compassion. He was turned into a spectacle. Today, thankfully, we have more space for gender expression and self-reinvention. None of this is absolution. It could explain why Jackson may have been misread in a different era, but it leaves untouched the question: What, exactly, do we owe the art when the artist is accused of harm?

AMERICA'S RECKONING, THE WORLD'S MEMORY

The truth is, parts of America never fully welcomed Jackson back after the court cases. His popularity's decline was shaped partly by race, partly by our deep but uneven revulsion toward scandal involving children, and partly by a media ecosystem that devours spectacle. But in Asia, Latin America, Europe, and Africa, Michael's music never stopped playing. The devotion persisted—a reminder that the world saw him not simply as a symbol of American chaos but as an artist whose radiance outlasted the noise.

Reconciling someone as complicated as Michael Jackson is an exercise in living with contradictions. His music endures because it's universal: Play "Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough" on a street in Lagos or London, and you can bet total strangers will start bopping instinctively. His music is a soundtrack of joy.

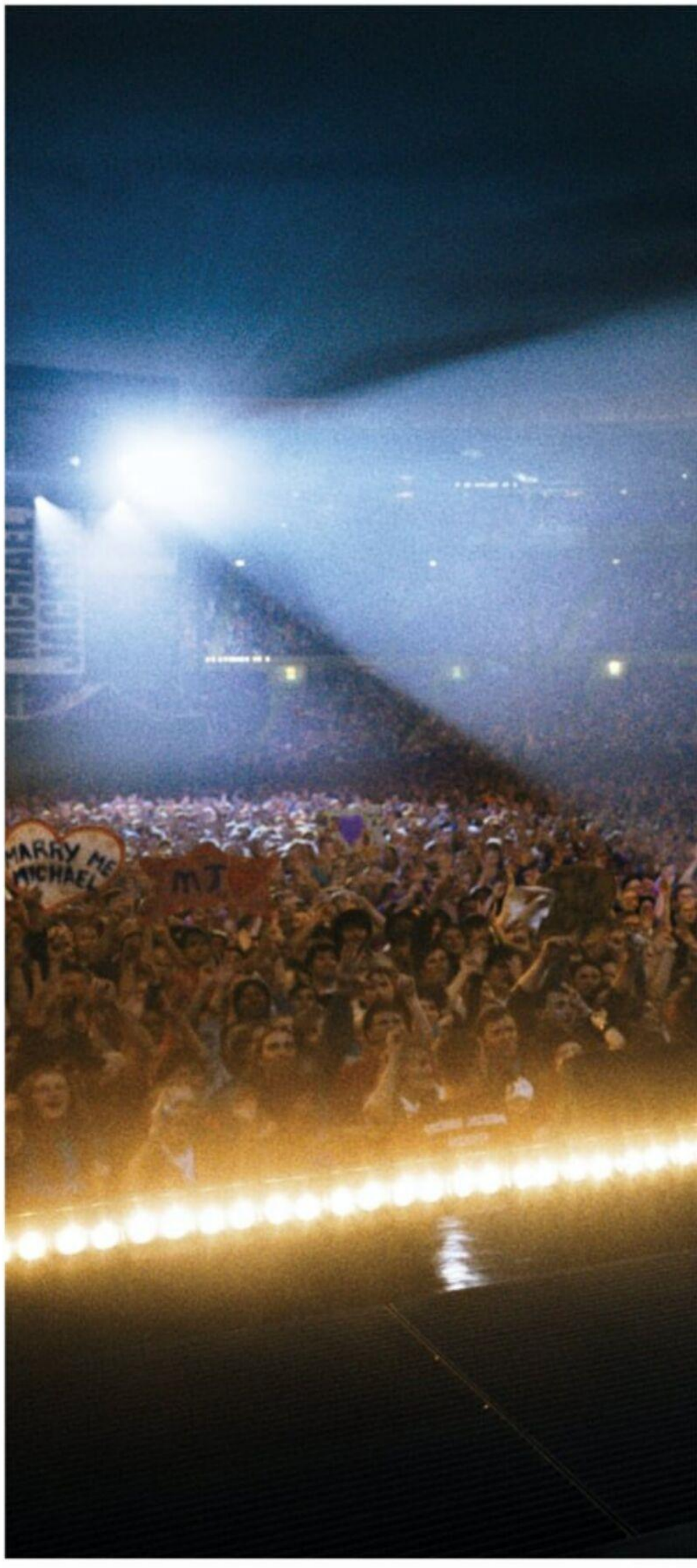
The biopic taps into that timelessness. But any credible retelling must somehow address the sexual abuse allegations. We turned Jackson into a god, and his unraveling is a reminder of what happens when gods are accused of very human crimes. Shortly before *Michael* was to enter theaters, four adult siblings filed a lawsuit against the Jackson estate alleging the entertainer had abused them for a decade. The estate dismissed the claim. But its presence reflects the cloudiness of Jackson's legacy.

At his peak, Michael offered us a cosmopolitan dreaminess that feels too remote in today's hyperfractured world. His story reminds us of a time when a single artist could cut across borders, identities, and politics, when ambiguity wasn't a liability but a connective force. His story is, in the end, a parable about the brilliance and limits of the American imagination. And even now—especially now—we may still find ourselves needing the optimism and joy he once made possible.

Movie Material

Michael, the new biopic about Jackson, is the latest in a long line of film treatments chronicling the performer's extraordinary accomplishments and myriad controversies.

BY DEBBIE RIGAUD



WHEN IT COMES TO THE BIG AND small screen, few celebrity lives have been documented from such wildly different perspectives—and involved so much A-list talent—as Michael Jackson's. The much-anticipated 2026 film *Michael*, starring Jackson's nephew Jaafar in the title role (Antoine Fuqua of the *Equalizer* trilogy directs, and Graham King of *Bohemian Rhapsody* produces), comes in the wake of more than two dozen features and documentaries about MJ. They include the award-winning *The Jacksons: An American Dream,* the 1992 ABC miniseries based on Katherine Jackson's autobiography, *My Family*; the dubious *Louis, Martin and Michael*, the 2003 documentary about British filmmaker Louis Theroux's ultimately failed efforts to interview MJ; the depressing 2004 *Man in the Mirror: The Michael Jackson Story*; the glowing *Bad 25,* Spike Lee's 2012 tribute to *Bad*; and 2019's damning *Leaving Neverland,* in which two men alleged they were sexually abused by Jackson when they were children.

It's not surprising that Hollywood gravitates

Jaafar Jackson plays his uncle in Lionsgate's 2026 biopic, Michael.

to MJ. Millions do, despite the scandals or even because of them. The entertainer's life is the formula for box office success: seismic talent + global celebrity + scandal. He is credited with revolutionizing pop music, breaking racial barriers on MTV, and setting new standards for music videos. A headline with Jackson's name still generates millions of views and hefty ad dollars. The Broadway show about him, *MJ: The Musical,* has grossed more than $300 million, just a sliver of the estimated $3.5 billion his estate has earned since his death. Since Jackson's death in 2009, he has topped *Forbes*' annual list of highest-earning dead celebrities every year except 2009, 2012, 2021, and 2022.

To be sure, on the film front, Michael Jackson is no Napoleon. The French general has appeared in some 180 flicks—including silent ones, historical epics, buddy comedies, and documentaries—so many that there are multiple books about Napoleon's filmography. Nor has MJ been portrayed at Jesus levels (at least 130), including the 1979 biopic often described as the most watched film ever, or Abraham Lincoln (300-plus). From a film catalog perspective, Jackson is not even Elvis (though he was briefly married to Elvis's daughter, Lisa Marie), who's been immortalized in dozens of features and documentaries. But while Elvis was part of a larger cultural phenomenon—the coming of age of teenagers—Jackson was in a category of his own making: "a luminous performer and damaged boy-man . . . whose gaudy sales figures and personal excesses defined him," wrote the *Deseret News* in 2009.

MJ proved to be bankable big- and small-screen material from the get-go, though the quality of the projects was uneven. The 1988 theatrical release *Moonwalker*, which wove together video segments to highlight his career up to that point, got mixed reviews but grossed $67 million on a budget of about $22 million, according to the Movie Database. For *The Jacksons: An American Dream,* ABC paid the family an estimated $1 million—possibly the highest fee for a television biopic at the time—plus a cut of the eventual profits from syndication, merchandising, videos, overseas sales, and a tie-in album.

And then there was the box office behemoth *This Is It*, the documentary of rehearsals for Jackson's planned comeback tour of 50 sold-out concerts that never happened because of the performer's death in June 2009. Sony reportedly paid $60 million for the movie, culled from

Angela Bassett played Katherine Jackson in the 1992 miniseries The Jacksons: An American Dream*; Flex Alexander in 2004's* Man in the Mirror.

Nia Long (top left) plays Katherine Jackson in Michael*, and Colman Domingo is Joe Jackson. The young Jacksons are portrayed (from left) by Judah Edwards (Tito), Jaylen Hunter (Marlon), Juliano Krue Valdi (Michael), Nathaniel McIntyre (Jackie), and Jayden Harville (Jermaine).*

more than 120 hours of digital video footage, which opened on more than 3,400 screens domestically, along with 96 Imax theaters, and another 27 internationally. "Looks like the world has missed one helluva concert," *The Hollywood Reporter* wrote in its review of the documentary that it described as "a strange yet strangely beguiling film that captures one of pop culture's great entertainers in the feverish grips of pure creativity." The film went on to bring in more than $260 million, making it one of the highest-grossing documentaries ever and a massive hit.

Musical artists with unhappy, messy lives have been Hollywood material for decades, often as vehicles to explore prejudice, drug abuse, criminal activity, and the price of fame. One of the first was 1972's *Lady Sings the Blues*, about jazz legend Billie Holiday, her heroin addiction, and the racism she endured. In the 1988 film *Bird*, Clint Eastwood paid tribute to saxophonist Charlie Parker, who revolutionized jazz, transforming it from dance music to an intellectual art form, and who died from complications related to severe heroin and alcohol addiction at age 34. More recently, there has been *Straight Outta Compton*, about the rise and fall of rap group NWA, and 2018's *Bohemian Rhapsody*,

While many hopefuls auditioned to play the title role in Michael, *director Antoine Fuqua said he chose Jaafar for the adult MJ because he looks like his uncle and is a talented singer and dancer.*

which chronicled the emotional struggles of Queen frontman Freddie Mercury, who died of complications from AIDS in 1991.

Lionsgate's *Michael* stars Michael Jackson's nephew Jaafar Jackson and is coproduced by John Branca and John McClain, co-executors of the Jackson estate. As is often the case with big-budget Hollywood productions, *Michael* (which cost an estimated $150 million to $155 million) has been a long time coming. Production on the film started in 2019, when producer King secured the rights. Fuqua signed on to direct in January 2023; the SAG/AFTRA strike delayed the start of filming until January 2024, and it wrapped in May 2024. *Michael* was then slated for release in April 2025, but the filmmakers moved the date to the fall. Then, in July 2025, *Deadline* reported a delay until April 24, 2026, reportedly because studio execs were dealing with *Michael*'s long runtime: more than three-and-a-half hours.

Meanwhile, reports surfaced that an additional 22 days of filming had been scheduled, in part because the first cut of the movie included scenes with one of the people who had accused Jackson of child abuse, and the accuser's 1994 settlement included the provision that he not be included in any dramatizations.

The holdups have seemed to only fuel excitement for *Michael,* as evidenced by the response to the trailer for the film, which dropped on November 6, 2025. Featuring a mash-up of some of Jackson's most famous tunes, including "Wanna Be Startin' Somethin,'" "Beat It," and "Billie Jean," the teaser begins with a voiceover stating what might be described as the obvious: "I know you've been waiting a long time for this," the narrator intones. The short highlights Jaafar as Jackson in early-day scenes with the Jackson 5 and in scenes with Quincy Jones, moonwalking, and shows a stadium full of screaming MJ fans.

In its first 24 hours, the *Michael* trailer scored more than 116 million views, making it the most-viewed trailer for any music biopic or concert movie in motion-picture history.

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Michael Jackson

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The King of Pop performed a private free concert for the Sultan of Brunei's 50th birthday in 1996.

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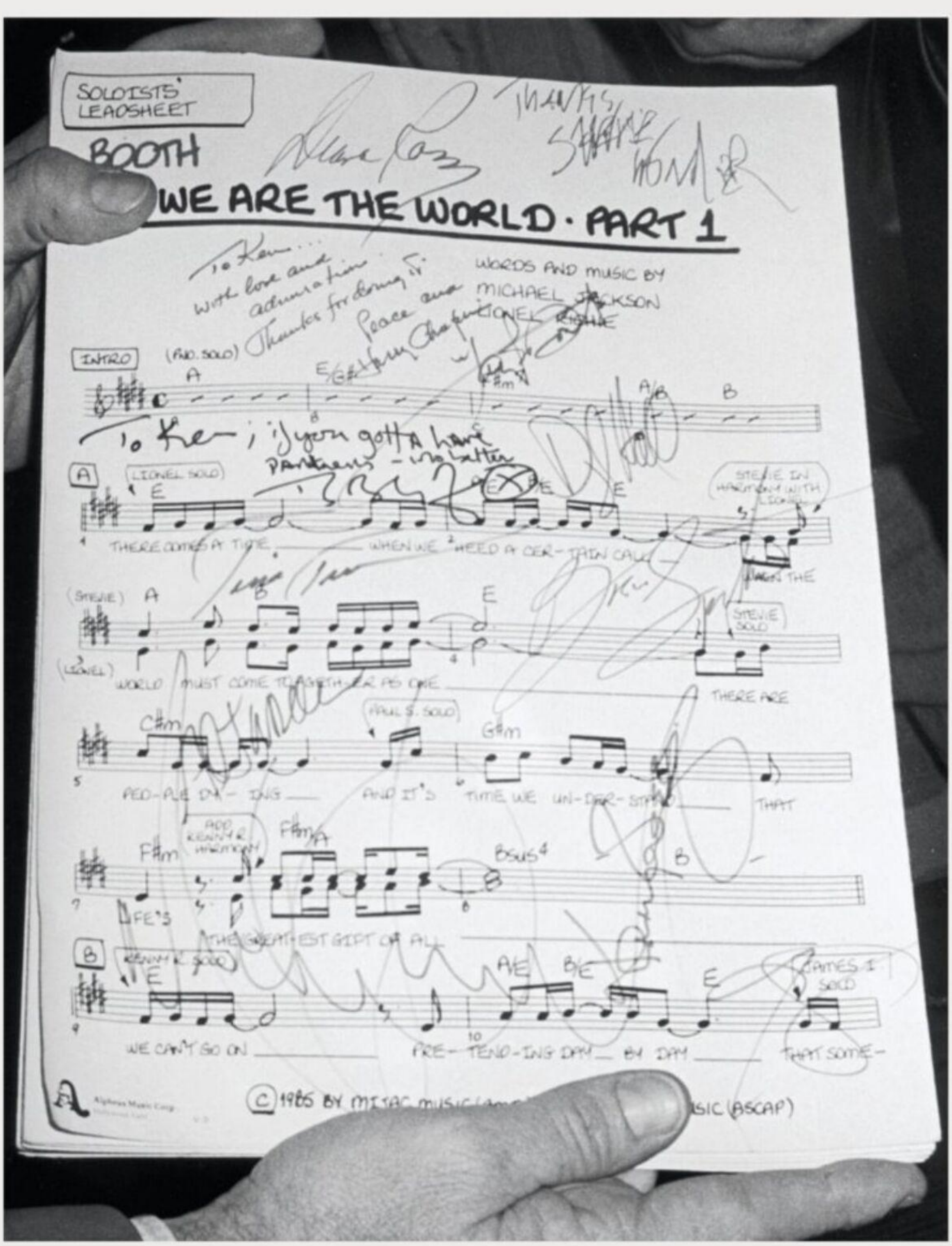
Signed, Sealed, and Delivered

Forty-five entertainment icons gathered at A&M Studios on January 28, 1985, to record “We Are the World,” written by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie and produced by Quincy Jones. Midway through the session, an autograph frenzy broke out, with the artists signing one another’s sheet music to keep as mementos.



THE KING OF POP

He was a lead performer at age 5, a star by age 11, and, with the release of the extraordinary, industry-shifting *Thriller*, a global sensation at 24. No one entertained an audience like Michael Jackson. Through his music—more than through his scarred public life and tragic early death—he continues to captivate and echo today.